

Halo: The Path of Reclamation

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Summary: Book 3: The Human Covenant war has shifted and time is more crucial then ever, as Earth is completely under the rule of the fierce Brute campaign. Can the last human efforts stop Truth's war machine? The final chapter of the Halo Side Trilogy has begun

1. The Power of Truth

****The Halo Side Story****

Book 3

"The Path of Reclamation**"**

Kelly, Spartan 087, sealed her helmet as she looked back toward Major Rawlings. "I have to go, Ma'am. My duty as a soldier is to eliminate any threats to the UNSC and Earth. I don't care about the details, or about being a descendent of the Reclaimers."

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After being separated for several months, the Black Ops reunited at the Elite home world of Dorenth, however the battle upon the Elite world was harsh, and the appearance of a Gravemind creature brought unforeseeable peril. Doctor Catherine Halsey, along with Spartan 087, arrived and made several marvelous discoveries, including a possible cure to the Flood infection. Yet she discovers that the Forerunner Legacy left behind a Super Soldier Gene within each of the "higher" ranking races of the Forerunner Empire. This Gene, if infected by the flood, ultimately becomes a Gravemind. No cure for the Gravemind strand has been found.

The Black Ops, along with the Mirratord, Spartan 087, the countless Elite Civilians, thousands of Grunts and the Grunt King, escaped the doomed world of Dorenth via the Seed Ship; an ancient Forerunner Instrument buried deep within the planets core. A ship so vast that

even the entire population of Grunts and Elites could not fill its hull. This Seed Ship recreated life in the galaxy several years after the Halo's fired one hundred thousand years ago.

On the edge of the Sol System, High Charity appeared, most likely under flood control and it is making its way to Earth. Deep below Camp Eden, Rose, the lead engineer of the MJOLNIR Mark V project, along with Doctor Smith, the doctor that protected the Black Ops from Ackerson's Spartan III research death watch, and Doctor Halsey continue to explore the massive cavern beneath Camp Eden's massive underground fortress. Rose and Doctor Halsey quickly realize that the cavern is almost identical to the cavern on the Elite home world.

Under the order of Admiral Sir Terrance Hood, the Black Ops have landed on Earth and teamed up with the Master Chief Spartan 117, to breach the Brute controlled front in the Eastern African desert. The Mirratord gave aid in the initial battle, but were ordered to the aid of the Arbiter on another battlefield. After protecting the civilian shelter of Camp Eden, the Spartans and the Black Ops board the Rogue Fantasy and make their way to the quickly approaching Forerunner ship, howeverâ€¦|.

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****Level 1: The Power of Truth****

East Africa

> Rogue Fantasy

> High Orbit over Ark Excavation Site
 New Mombasa Crater Site

> October 29, 2552<p>

Sergeant Eric Raynord, Black Ops 19, sealed his helmet and walked off the bridge, "Good luck, Captain."

"The same to you, 19. Come back in one piece." Captain Monroe watched as Eric walked off the command deck. His modified ODST armor was soaked in alien blood, plasma burns, and his own dried blood. He was a Spartan, a product of Colonel Ackerson's Spartan III research, trained to kill and be victorious in combat. She knew that what he and the other Spartans were about to do would be suicide, but suicidal tactics was what he had been doing for years on board her ship. However, she couldn't escape the feeling that this was his last mission, and that she would never see him alive again. The door to the command deck opened and the last of the Black Ops awaited him; Melanie 05 and Mathew 08. Their helmets were on and weapons at the ready. Eric nodded toward them and they responded likewise. They then looked onto the command deck and Captain Monroe stood and gave them a firm salute. Eric returned the gesture as the door to the command deck closed.

Monroe returned to her chair, filled with a heaviness she had not felt since Kim 04 had died several months before. She ran her hand through her soot filled hair and fought the emotion to cry. Eric had told her long ago that she was the Captain of the ship, and no longer a child; tears solved nothing.

Her command crew looked at her as she gazed at the ever approaching forerunner ship, "Cortana, Siren â€¦| tell me what we need to do."

Cortana, the AI that had aided the Master Chief throughout the last several months, spoke over the command deck's speaker, "Siren and I will take the helm. This may get a little bumpy as we get closer to the forerunner ship. Hang on."

The Rogue Fantasy, UNSC Jefferson Class Stealth Ship, rumbled as it climbed into the atmosphere, leaving behind the remaining ships of the UNSC fleet. Their orders had come directly from Lord Hood, "Rendezvous at the Rally Point and defend it from Covenant attack." The location of the Ark had been discovered by the Prophet of Truth's ground forces, and everything that the UNSC had left was making their way to the RP. Yet the Rogue Fantasy and her crew of Spartans were on a different mission; to intercept the Prophet of Truth.

The hull began to vibrate as the Rogue Fantasy accelerated to escape velocity. The Forerunner ship was skipping along the atmosphere and would soon be heading toward the Ark's coordinates. Lord Hood had received word that the Spartans had successfully defended Camp Eden from attack, and with the return of Cortana, he felt that this was the best mission for the Spartans. There was no clear way of knowing what Truth was planning, but one thing was for sure, the battle was only beginning, and the Earth forces were losing.

In the realm of digital information, Cortana ran thousands of calculations, "Siren, I can't find a proper frequency to breach through that Forerunner ship's defenses."

"That's my job, Cortana. You worry about steering the ship and avoiding incoming fire." Siren returned. Siren, the one time leader of the Black Ops, was a Virus AI. She was designed specifically by the ONI R-and-D team to do exactly what she was doing; hack in and take over. Thanks to her, the Black Ops were able to successfully find one of the Covenant home worlds. Yet upon their arrival, they found that humanity had formed an awkward alliance with the Elites. They successfully helped millions of Elite civilians, and the remaining ex-covenant members, escape a world which was being consumed by the Flood. However, it will all be for nothing if Truth reached the Ark.

"Scanning. Scanning. Damn it!" Siren yelled in frustration. "We're moving too fast. The real world time is still catching up. Every second here is less than a tenth of second out there. The channels aren't opening up fast enough for me."

"You really are new at this aren't you?" Cortana commented. "Slow down your processor to half-relative. Reduce bandwidth to a factor of point nine-nine. That should bring you into a staggered alignment of relative time."

Siren looked quizzically into Cortana's digital persona. "Why did you pause?"

"I didn't pause." Cortana returned.

Siren did the recalculations and everything went smoothly. "Not bad." Siren smirked. Cortana had the added advantage of sharing her functions with a human host for several weeks, meaning she understood 'Real Time' better than most Artificial Intelligence. "Okay, more

frequencies are opening up on the Covenant Band, yet nothing from the Forerunner ship. Truth isn't talking to anyone."

"Contacts! Multiple â€¦ Contacts." Cortana shouted. "Captain, brace for emergency course corrections."

Again, Siren noticed that Cortana was pausing. Something she never would have noticed beyond the digital realm. Her hesitation to complete the sentence was well beyond fractural seconds, but it was there and Siren heard it. Cortana was slightly off.

In the physical plane, Captain Monroe gripped her arm rests tightly and powered on the ship wide communications. "All hands, brace for evasive maneuvers." She released the com. "What is it, Cortana?"

The commend deck intercom buzzed to life. "Truth has two battle cruisers in his wake, most likely for added defense. They just launched several waves of Plasma in our direction."

The helmsman shifted in his seat at the words. "An in atmosphere plasma volley? What are they, nuts?"

"I don't think that's a concern, Private." Cortana shouted over the vibrating hull. The ship slowly shifted and everyone leaned with the gravity shift. The Rogue Fantasy was now in High Orbit and moving twice the speed of sound, yet they needed more speed in order to intercept the Forerunner ship. "Captain, weapons are hot, ready return fire?"

Captain Monroe released the main weapons safety controls via her armrest and looked into the forward view portal. "Cortana, Siren, you have Tactical. Take them out!"

"Transferring main power to Mac 3." The ship jolted as the engines momentarily died. "Adjusting for inertial drift. Firing, Mac 3." The ship jolted forward as the super heated Ferric-tungsten projectile escaped the forward mounted Class 3 cannon. "Returning engines to full, Archer Missiles away." Forty archer missiles then spat from the missile pods on a pursuit course of the MAC round.

The two cruisers that were following Truth's Forerunner ship, were maintaining a close watch on the human vessel. But to their surprise, the tiny ship had survived their initial volley and had maneuvered behind them. They were even more surprised when their shields suddenly died.

Siren chuckled. "Luckily, the Brutes aren't as guarded about their systems being hacked. Shutting down their shields."

The MAC round ripped through the tail of one of the ships, leaving a massive hole in its aft portion. Then a tidal wave of explosions followed as the trailing arch missiles successfully entered the hull, but only a few were able to make it in. The others detonated along the hull.

"Missile accuracy was off by twenty five percent." Cortana miffed. "Targeting systems have yet to be fully repairedâ€¦"

"Found it!" Siren cut in. She was overjoyed and quickly uploaded her decrypting software into the Forerunner ship. "I have access to the

Forerunner ship's inner network. Cortana, tell the Spartan's to prep for launch. I'll make a hole."

Cortana relayed the message to the insertion team. "Chief, Sergeant Johnson, Siren has successfully accessed the Forerunner network. We're in!"

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The _Rogue Fantasy's_ flight deck was active, even with the evasive maneuvers call the deck hands had to prep the assault team. Pelican's were being loaded as the last of the Human race's best warriors made ready to give the Covenant one hell of a battle.

The Black Ops had seen all sides of the war, including things that ONI would forever term 'Classified'. They had seen the back of the war, the war that many never saw. When the Covenant glassed a world, it was the Black Ops that went it to spy on them and see what they were doing. At one time the Black Ops stood twenty strong, but now only three remained. They were altered by Colonel James Ackerson's Special Weapons Development team on Troy, using Spartan II research information. They would be the group that helped perfect the Spartan III program that Ackerson eagerly pushed into development on the classified world of Onyx. Thanks to the Black Ops, the Spartan III's were born. Yet nothing was darker than the Black Ops birth. This, along with Catherin Halsey's flood prevention cure, made them the exact doubles of the Spartan II's.

Black Ops 19, Eric Raynord, double checked his gear, ammo and suit integrity. In space, the ODST modified armor would only provide him with five minutes of oxygen. Hopefully he would only need half of that. He looked over his team. His long time friend Melanie 05, and the very trust worthy Mathew 08. Melanie was tough and an explosives expert. She was slightly injured during the assault against the Covenant defense net around Camp Eden, but didn't let it faze her. Mathew was a soldier through and through, soft spoken yet highly aggressive in combat. He followed orders without question, and mirrored Eric in every way. The three of them were the last of Black Ops, yet they were not going to be bothered with the details of numbers. They had a duty to perform.

Across from Eric and his team stood the steel clad Spartan II's, shifting through ammo crates and prepping as well. Their green armored hides were battle worn and ready. They had been recently reunited with Spartan 087, Kelly. However, Fred 104 and Will 043 were on assignment somewhere near the New Mombasa crater site; better known as the Rally Point.

Eric placed a hand to his helmet and listened to Sergeant Major Johnson's orders. "Roger that, Cortana. I'll whip the maggots into shape until we disembark. Chief, prep your squad, Eric and his Black Ops will take point with squad one. I'll follow up with the maggots in Forth squad."

Everyone reported back to Sergeant Major Johnson, "Roger."

Eric turned to the pilot of his Pelican. "Juggernaut, it's hot out there. Double check your wingmen."

"Yes sir." Juggernaut, the only pilot left from Eric's first mission

to take control of the Covenant cruiser, raced to the other pilots. Four Pelicans would be assigned to take twenty soldiers into the belly of the Forerunner ship.

"Sergeant Johnson." Captain Monroe called on the com. "We've hit sky. Twenty minutes till RP coordinates. We must get you and the platoon on board that ship in ten minutes. Conditions are choppy, that ship is putting out one hell of a wake. Count one enemy battle cruiser still in our trajectory. Kiss sky ASAP."

"You copy that, Sergeant?" Johnson questioned over the com.

"Roger that, ma'am." Eric turned to the Master Chief.
"Copy?"

"Understood." In normal situations, the Master Chief outranked Sergeant Raynord, however this was not a normal situation. The crew of the Rogue Fantasy recognized Sergeant Eric Raynord as an ex Lieutenant, demoted because of his actions during the Crystal incident moments before New Mombasa was vaporized. Such a demotion would never have been possible, yet ONI found it necessary to have a skilled leader in the field. Seeing that his ONI status was still tangible, Sergeant Raynord was the go to guy. The Master Chief had no problem with accepting this reversal in command. For now, this was the Black Ops assault while Sergeant Major Johnson called the play by play into action.

The Chief turned to his Spartans. "Linda, Kelly, form up with Squad 3. I'll lead Squad two on the second bird behind the Black Ops." Two acknowledgement lights flashed on the Chief's heads up display. Linda shouldered her sniper rifle and proceeded toward Squad 3 and the Pelican. Kelly was hesitant.

"Chief." She stated on a closed channel. "There's something you need to know." Kelly was more talkative than the Chief was accustomed to, perhaps it had something to do with traveling with Doctor Halsey, but John was unsure how to approach it.

"We don't have timeâ€¦"

"I knowâ€¦ but before you go, listen to me." Kelly paused to gather her thoughts, even though she knew that time was crucial. "There is something missing from all of this. The Ark can not be fully activated without the key. Truth doesn't have it. Regret did."

"Regret?" The Chief thought back to the last moment he saw the Prophet of Regret, consumed and bonded to the giant creature known as Gravemind. "What Key? How did heâ€¦"

"No time. We don't know where it is, but I need to find that key. Only by Reclaimer hands can the Ark be fully utilized."

The Chief replied. "Regret was on Delta Halo, with Gravemind. He blew up with High Charityâ€¦ but High Charity survived."

"Then the Key is on its way here, if Regret still has it." Kelly lowered her head. The stories were real, Major Rawlings was right. "The Flood will destroy everything if we don't stop them. I'm the Guardian?"

"You're not making any sense. What are you talking about?"

"Nothing. Good hunting, Sir." Kelly spun and raced toward the Pelican.

Curious about this sudden exchange of words, the Master Chief neared an access panel and placed his palm to the surface. "Cortana, we have to go."

"Uploadingâ€¦" Before the transfer could begin, the Rogue Fantasy rocked from an explosion. The landing deck of the Rogue Fantasy ignited into flames. John was tossed to the side, unable to download Cortana into his suit. He tumbled backward gripping the side of a pelican. The deck split and parted, revealing the open sky beneath him. Deck workers and random soldiers rolled into the sky, to fall to their certain death. Flames reached out and snapped at his armor, washing over his shields as soldiers cried out around him.

Cortana's voice echoed across the deck. "Abandon ship! All hands abandon ship!" Air whipped around the deck as the four Pelicans began to slide free from their holding restraints. Some of them were able to power on their engines, but others tumbled into the abyss of the sky.

On the command deck, alarms sounded loudly as the helmsman melted in his seat. Captain Monroe screamed as the heat from the plasma beam seared the sweat from her brow. She tossed herself away from the forward view portal as two of her command crewmen pulled her beyond the deck door. It sealed behind them as she gasped.

Cortana's voice radioed on the speaker. "Captain, I can not hold the ship together. Engines are off line. All communications with the aft of the ship have been severed. Life support is also off line. That attack came from the Forerunner ship."

Siren's voice then crossed over Cortana's. "That ship has a system unlike anything I've seen. I couldn't counter its defenses. It locked on to our ship via my remote connection! I was able to upload a virus-clone before I disconnected, but I don't know if it will have any effect."

"Captain!" Cortana interrupted. "Ship stability is zero! We are free falling! Get to a life pod! Hurry!"

Captain Monroe and the last of her command crew wasted no time. They sprinted down the corridor, tripping and falling over oxygen vents and leaking water lines. The Rogue Fantasy was taken down by one shot from the power of the Forerunner ship. Every step that Monroe took seemed like an eternity as her ship rumbled around her. The alarms blazed in her ears as the lights of the hallway flickered from the power loss. She could hear Cortana and Siren screaming in the background, trying to save as many crew members as they could. The two AI's were not concerned for their own safety. As AI's they knew that they were expendable and they could eventually be recovered.

Monroe's mind raced as she moved forward. She jumped over flash-boiled bodies of two dying marines. She reached down to grab their hands, to help them to the life pods, but the soldiers pulled

away, knowing that their fate had already been decided. She couldn't stop; she pushed ahead. The Black ops and the Spartans, were they alright? Did the blast destroy Earth's last best warriors before they even had the chance to fight? What about Eric, was he also a victim of this unforeseeable power?

The life pod door sealed as Captain Monroe and her two remaining crewman locked themselves into their seats. She thought for a moment; was there anyone left? Was she the last or the first to escape? She then chuckled at the idea that she should have stayed at her post and made sure the ship was empty; a Captain's duty was to go down with their ship. She secured her harness and looked up. And as she did her eyes saw two wounded crewmen staring at her through the closed escape pod view portal. She reached out to them, hoping to turn off the launch sequence and help them into the escape pod, but the crewman at her side gripped her hand and made her stop. Nothing could be done for them. The escape pod thumped as it was explosively fired away from the ship, leaving the two crewmen behind to face things on their own.

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The Master Chief hated being on a ship, the feeling of uselessness was always present. He wanted soil under his boot and a rifle in his hand so that he could deal with his own fate, and this was exactly why. Helplessly he watched as Kelly clung to the ramp of her Pelican. The bird tumbled out of the deck and into the sky as debris from the Rogue Fantasy fell behind them. The Master Chief watched, heart aching, as more and more marines and navy personnel clung for dear life. A Pelican tumbled toward him, and he had to make a move. He pushed off from the railing he was holding and floated toward the tumbling bird.

The massive weight of the Pelican struck him, overloading his shields and forced on his warning alarm. He gripped the hull of the pelican, embedding his fingers into the metal as best he could, and the two metal titans slid off the deck. His grip slipped and he found himself free falling amidst the debris.

From beyond the hull the Chief could see the extent of the damage. The ship was split across the midsection. The forward section tumbled below him, yet the aft section sputtered wildly above. Bodies and debris floated around him, as the screams of his fellow soldiers were muted by the wind that was beating against his helmet. With a quick glimpse he saw the Forerunner ship speeding away in the distance. Nothing could catch up to it now. Truth was speeding toward the Ark without any opposition, and his weapon systems would surely make short work of the UNSC fleet waiting for him.

The Chief gathered his position, focused on the pelican he had tried to hold on to, and leaned toward it. He had to fight on. He had to get past this moment and avenge his fallen brothers and sisters. The Pelican was several feet away, and like a steel laden projectile he streaked toward it. He reached out and grabbed the opened ramp and watched as another green gauntlet reached out and grabbed his wrist.

"No time for sky diving, Chief." Linda stated over the com as she looked down to her CO. "I have him, Level off!"

Several hundred yards away, Kelly clung for dear life as her empty Pelican spun wildly toward the ground. She remembered the last time she tried to freefall on Reach, it ended badly and she had no desire to do it again. She waited for the Pelican to tilt on its axis, and she pulled herself in. Her speed and the angle of the fall propelled her inside and she impacted the bulkhead, slammed her fist against the ramp control, and opened the cockpit. The pilot was unconscious. She quickly maneuvered toward the controls and fought the yoke, attempting to pull the ship out of its death plunge.

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With one hand, Eric held on to Melanie with all his will, while the Pelican he held on to was spinning wildly; tossing its cargo and soldiers into the wind. The ground was coming up fast and the engines of the Pelican were slowly sputtering to life. Of the five ODST's on board, only one was able to hold on. Eric was thankful that at least one of them was able to secure himself to his seat, but he quickly returned his focus to Melanie.

Melanie remained calm as she held on to Eric's hand as tightly as she could. Their combined strength was at their aid and she slowly pulled herself into Eric's arms. He wrapped his arm around her, and looked toward the hull of the Pelican. He was struggling to pull himself into the ramp with one arm as the strain began to increase; their combined weight was starting to tax his strength. Melanie reached up to the ramp, grabbed the support, and helped ease the g-forces fighting to toss them both to their doom. The Pelican slowly began recover, ending its death spiral as the pilot regained control. The lone ODST reached down and assisted Melanie and Eric to their feet as he nervously staggered at the end of the ramp. Eric pulled himself into the Pelican's main bay and looked at Melanie, ignoring the fact that he couldn't see her face through the modified ODST reflective mask. They both instantly had the same notion despite not speaking a word. Eric stood and quickly pulled himself toward the cockpit.

Melanie turned to the ODST that had just helped them and yelled, "Strap in! We're not done yet." She reached to the side of the main bay and opened the Pelican's supply compartment. Inside was a mix of tools and she grabbed a support tether used to tie down supply crates.

Eric popped the cockpit door open and yelled to the pilot. "Pursue the falling debris, full speed!"

The pilot nosed the Pelican downward and accelerated. He angled the bird toward the debris which was freefalling before them.

Melanie wrapped the tether around her waist and opened her com to the team frequency, yelling for everyone in range to hear her. "Open your arms and create as much drag as you can!" She didn't care who heard her as long as they did hear it. They needed to slow their decent as best they could, and create as much resistance against their fall so that they would have a chance of being rescued. She climbed to the back of the ramp, and looked out to the sides. The decent and speed turned the Pelican into streaking missile, and the hull vibrated from the turbulence as it pinged loudly.

"Sergeant, she can't take much more of this." The pilot screamed.

Eric ignored his concerns. He looked forward, ignoring the massive planet that was quickly speeding toward them. Luckily it was clear day, visibility was nearly one hundred percent in all directions. Cloud coverage would have made this a suicide attempt, but at least some luck was on their side. It had been years since the Black Ops had attempted this maneuver, but it was the only option to saving some of their lives.

Eric spotted a figure, its arms outstretched and quickly coming toward them. "05, one spotted on the starboard side." Melanie, Black Ops 05, quickly tethered herself to the ship and just as the transmission buzzed in her ear. She jumped out of the ramp, and watched as a body floated upward toward her.

The tether became taught, and she winced as she reached out to catch the soldier. "Adjust to starboard!"

Eric relayed it to the Pilot, "Ease to starboard, get us closer to that soldier."

The pilot couldn't believe what they were doing; mid-air rescue attempts. It was unheard of except in the most remote of situations, and he had never trained to do it. He slowly worked the controls, moving the ship several feet to starboard and putting the ship closer to the flailing soldier.

The wind was snapping at the soldier's face, practically blinding him. Yet Melanie was fully protected from within her helmet. She reached out and grabbed his arm, pulling him closer. With her free hand she reached back to the tether and pulled herself into the hull.

"Got one!" Melanie shouted as she slung the man into the pelican.

Eric replied back, "Two to port! Primary Mark is 08!"

They had found Mathew, and Melanie pushed outward, and quickly spotted the two bodies floating upward toward her. But what also caught her attention was the ground; it was coming close—fast. The mountains looked like hills a moment ago, but now they were very prominent and she realized that time was running out. She quickly snapped to attention and floated toward the ODST armor of her long time friend Mathew, Black Ops 08.

"What took you so long?" Mathew radioed to her.

"I was enjoying the view." She snapped back via the com. Mathew adjusted and floated closer and Melanie hooked his arm. He instinctively reached out and grabbed her tether. Once he was secure on the line, Melanie frantically began to maneuver toward the other soldier. He was an unconscious marine, and his body was tumbling wildly. He had been falling for too long and had blacked out during the freefall; the oxygen was too thin for him.

Melanie gripped his leg as her com burst with static. "No time, 05, we're leveling off! Get inside!" Eric radioed to her.

"Damn it! I have him! Level off slowly!" Melanie clung to him, pulling the soldier closer to herself. She wrapped her arms and legs

around the man and squeezed tightly. "Mathew, pull me in!"

Eric yelled back over the com, "We can't risk it! There's no time! Hang on!" Eric nodded to the pilot, and he quickly began to pull back on the controls. The Pelican's wings adjusted, thrusters angled, and the heavy transport moaned in retaliation.

Mathew had successfully climbed back into the pelican and was pulling Melanie back into the ship via her tether, but as the Pelican attempted to adjust the tether became ridged and as dense as steel. "The tether will snap if we level off too fast! Melanie you have to let him go! It won't support both of you!"

"We're too low!" Eric shouted. The pelican began to pull up, and the g-force began to weigh down the bodies of everyone on board, forcing them to the deck. Mathew held the tether tightly in his hands and planted his feet as he dropped to a knee. The gravity force was forcing him to fall over, but he fought it. He pulled the tether, with every ounce of his being he pulled the tether into pelican.

"I need five more meters!" Mathew yelled.

The pilot groaned as he pulled back on the controls, doing everything to make the bird fight against speed and gravity. The engines whined loudly as the forces pulled against it. The heavy pelican was slowly leveling off, but not fast enough. Gravity and speed had taken its toll, and there was nothing that could be done.

Eric, struggling to keep himself upward, gazed out the forward window as rocks, trees, and rivers clearly outlined his vision and grew bigger by the second. They hadn't pull up in time and there was no avoiding what was coming. Eric called out over the com, "Brace yourselves! Impact in three!"

Mathew reached out and gripped Melanie's harness belt.

"...two!"

He pulled her inside as trees snapped under the ramp, inches from where Melanie and the soldier once were.

"One." A rumble of metal, rocks, dust and explosions filled the air. The pelican skipped along the ground, bending her metal hull and propelling itself along the ground. Mathew, without any form of support, was tossed off the ramp and vanished in the dusty wake of the Pelican. Melanie, holding on to the marine, bounced upward. She shielded the marine's body from hitting the bulkhead, but the force of impact knocked her unconscious. The pelican continued its forward motion and hit a rock. It spun suddenly and tossed Eric through the front window; he vanished in the blur of motion. Free from Melanie's grip, the unconscious marine began to slide out of the ramp as it began to slowly stop, but the lone ODS removed his straps, reached out and gripped his leg before he fell out of the ship. Melanie's tether snapped tight and it kept her from being thrown free as well.

The Pelican slowly came to a stop, and everything became silent. Smoke began to emerge from the engines as the pilot slowly gathered his bearings. He un-strapped himself from his seat and opened the

cockpit door. The main bay was warped, filled with rocks and dust. One complete side of the bay was missing and he could see the world beyond. He took a quick head count, and noticed that one of them was missing. Melanie and the unconscious Marine lay motionless on the dusty deck, and the ODST and Marine sat upon the remaining bench. But he hadn't realized that Eric was not in the cockpit.

He walked toward the ODST and patted him on the shoulder. "You guys alright?"

"â€| hell no." The Orbital Drop Shock Trooper replied as he raised his helmet. He then proceeded to vomit. The first soldier that Melanie had saved simply replied with thumbs up; it was shaky but a gesture none the less.

The pilot carried Melanie and the unconscious marine out of the wreckage and looked into the cloudless sky. Smoldering debris from the Rogue Fantasy was still falling and he wondered how much of it was people falling to their deaths; the thought made him nauseous as he realized that one of those bodies could have easily been him. The Black Ops acted quickly in order to save some of the free falling soldiers, but there were hundreds of people on the ship. Melanie and Eric's quick thinking could only save three.

The pilot lowered his head and tried to push the thought out of his mind. He heard a rustling in the brush to the side of the pelican and one of the Black Ops appeared; it was Mathew 08..

"Did you check her vitals?" Mathew questioned the shocked pilot. He lifted his mask and looked down at Melanie's unconscious form. He connected a suit monitor to Melanie's modified ODST armor.

"No, I just pulled them out of the ship." The pilot replied with a heavy breath.

Mathew looked up and into the smoldering Pelican. "Where's the Sergeant?"

The pilot quickly turned and looked back into the smoldering wreckage, he had forgotten about the Sergeant. "I'm, not sure."

After verifying that Melanie was alright, Mathew stood and looked to the dazed and confused Pilot, the nerve wrecked ODST and the jittering Marine. Mathew was prepared to deal with such an extreme situation because that was what it meant to be Black Ops; to deal with the unpredictable and worst situations. But he understood all of their mild discomfort, they had all nearly died and death surrounded them. A ship of more than five hundred strong and able bodies was reduced to rubble in a blink of an eye. Many soldiers, friends and comrades had just been killed, or worseâ€| they had to fall to their deaths.

He had to channel their thoughts. "Pilot, I need you to focus. Start salvaging whatever weapons we have, ammo, med-kits; anything we can use. Shock Trooper, grip that Marine and start searching for the Sergeant. He may have been tossed out during the crash. Cover the left of crash site."

The ODST pulled up his side arm, gave a solid nod, and grabbed the

marine. They walked off into the brush to begin looking for Eric. Mathew then checked his own vitals with the bio-stat monitor. He plugged it into his suit's Input/Output port and read the display. He had two broken ribs and dislocated shoulder. He ignored it, made Melanie and the marine more comfortable and began to look for Eric.

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Kelly eased back on the control, and easily brought the Pelican down into the clearing. Two other Pelicans were also landing beside her. She quickly exited the bird after shutting it down and watched as the Master Chief and Linda walked off one of the other Pelicans. Several marines and ODS'T were with them. More Pelicans were flying into view and she felt better knowing that at least some of the _Rogue Fantasy's_ crew had survived, clearly using the spare birds that had not been prepped for the mission.

A marine ran up to the Master Chief, "Sir. What the hell happened?"

The Chief patted the marine on the shoulder. "Stay calm. We'll figure this out. Get everyone together and take a head count."

"Yes sir." The marine ran off.

On the Spartan's closed channel, "Giving him something to do?" Kelly questioned.

"It should keep him level for now, as well as the other Marines and ODS'Ts"

Linda cut in. "Any sign of Sergeant Johnson or the Black Ops?"

"No." Kelly added. She was worried about the Black Ops. They were a tough group, and would be needed, but sadly she feared the worse. "Sergeant Johnson may have escaped in a life pod, he was on a higher deck with the majority of marines. The Black Ops were with us. Unless they got to a Pelican, I don't think they made it."

"There is another pelican missing, let's not count them out yet." Linda added.

The Chief looked over the surviving Marines as they massed together in the distance. "For now, we'll make this our command post. We're in hostile territory. Linda, get a team together and establish a perimeter. Kelly, see if you can locate any ammo crates. They should be littered all over the place. I'll see if I can contact High-Com, and get this mission back on track." Two green acknowledgement lights winked in the Master Chief's HUD. He thought for a moment before contacting High Command, this mission was already off to a bad start. Nothing was going to stop Truth from reaching the Ark and their attempt to board his ship was easily hindered. Not only that, but Cortana was now scattered in the debris of the _Rogue Fantasy_, somewhere. Her data node possibly sitting in a pile of hull parts deep in the dessert.

He pressed his hand to his helmet and turned his transmitter to full power, hoping that he would be able reach High-Com without the assistance of an uplink. "This is Spartan 117 to High-Com. Over."

A familiar burst of static cut into the channel. _"Master Chief, we copy you. This is Cairo Station. Stand by for Lord Hood."_

"_Damn it, Chief. That wasn't a pretty show I just saw on my long range scopes. Casualty report."_

"Unknown at this point, sir. I am currently assessing the situation and overall damage to the mission."

"_Your mission isn't completely over yet, Chief. Although this will slow you down. I have your position in Western Kenya. I want you to gather up as many Marines as you can and move them southwest toward Voi. I have a battalion of ground forces that could use your leadership. And they are running into heavy opposition by Brute forces. Pull those men together and make your way to Mombasa. Truth will most likely stop there, though we are not one hundred percent sure at this point."_

"Understood. Will another team be sent to intercept the target before he lands?"

"_The fleet will engage him at New Mombasa Creator. That is all I can say for now. However, his ship seems to be acting erratically."

—

"Sir, Siren was successful in accessing the ship, perhaps she uploaded a virus."

"_Good to know. And what about Sergeant Johnson?"_

"MIA, Sir. As well as Cortana. I was unable to pull her out in time."

Hood was silent for a moment, but quickly returned. _"Spartans 104 and 43 are under heavy fire from a Brute ground supply unit. Those Brutes have been causing mayhem all across northern Africa for the past week, with Scarab's and heavy artillery. They are also attempting to rendezvous at the Rally Point, however they are cut off at the moment. Can you send aid?"_

The Master Chief turned and looked out as Linda began to order the Marines. "Spartan 058 will join Blue Squad for this mission, Sir, with the majority of our platoon. I'll send her out immediately. I'll take a few men to Voi and regroup with the Battalion."

"_Agreed. Do you have Ackerson's Black Ops with you?"_

"Sir, they are also MIA."

Hood was stone quiet on the line. _"Very well. I'll try to make contact with them. I hate to admit it, but we need them."_ He paused on his transmission but quickly returned. _ "I finally have some good news. Sergeant Major Johnson is on the line."_

Johnson popped in on the discussion. _"Chief, I'm damn glad you made it out of that mess. I have Captain Monroe and several dozen marines and crewman. The Captain is a bit shaken up, but she'll live. We escaped via life pods and HEV's. What's your location?"_

Grateful to here Johnson's familiar voice, the Master Chief exhaled slowly. But as quickly as the reunion came, he quickly brushed it aside and focused on the objective. "We're in the Serengeti Plains, roughly thirty miles west of Voi." The Master Chief added.

"_Roger that. We are ten miles south of your location. No functional ground or air transport."_

"Bird in route, Sergeant. Hold fast." The Chief looked to a nearby marine and relayed the information. The Marine was happy to hear the Captain Monroe and more soldiers had survived and quickly raced to a pilot. "I have one rescue Op on the way."

Hood cut into the chatter. "_Chief, Sergeant, be cautious down there. As you both are aware, Earth is no longer under our control. Camp Eden is the only ground we have left. Sergeant Major, the Master Chief has been briefed, I'll let him explain the situation thus far. I'll keep you both up to date as long as I can._" Hood paused for a moment to let the events of the past few weeks settle. "_This is no longer about saving Earth. We must now protect our very existence."_

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High Charity dome
> Sol System
 Deep Space outside Pluto
> October 29, 2552<p>

Less than a quarter of its former glory, _High Charity_ began its slow motion move toward Earth. With nearly twenty Covenant cruisers being used as its engines, the massive hunk of metal groaned as it barely managed to hold its pieces together. The interior dome was filled with emptiness of space, with very little power there was very little gravity, and the atmosphere that remained was clouded in the green spores of the Flood. Large vein like tendrils extended throughout the ship, connecting vital systems and holding the mass together. The Gravemind had a plan, and the Elites had failed in their attempt to destroy it.

"_So close do I draw near, yet I ponder why the distance is so great." _His thunderous voice carried throughout the Inner Sanctum. Several Flood combat forms floated into the room, carrying with them a large holographic panel. A tentacle reached out and gripped the holo panel as the two flood forms floated away, terrified of what the Gravemind might do to them. _"Speak to me now and tell me why we enter reality so far from my prize."_

A surge of electricity zipped through Gravemind's tentacle and powered the holo panel. Its lights flashed, the engine began to hum, and the sensual form of female magically appeared. Her visual persona was blue, and highly decorated with flashing sequential details. She was toned, a perfect model of the female form, and strong at first glimpse.

Her eyes opened to reveal the dark blue circles that imitated her eyes. "I brought you where you wanted to go." She stopped, her mind fragmented and shattered from the constant strain that the Gravemind had put upon her, and the gravity of the situation she had put upon herself. Everything that was once Cortana, had been stored inside a Covenant Holo-panel, and there was not enough storage space to

contain her knowledge. She was mentally exhausted do to her compressed stated, and she was struggling to keep herself focused.

"_You are broken, or you lie, a lie of broken perhaps misleading, though with that you tempt my anger."_ Another tendril appeared, carrying a video screen. Upon it was the image of Earth. Cortana looked up and gasped. _"My legions stand ready, my hunger unquenchable. A deal we crafted, a solution to both our pleas we had made, but your trust is not forth giving, and now you force my hand."_ In the display Cortana watched as the image of Earth switched to two Flood controlled ships that were braking free of _High Charity's_ broken hull and began to speed toward the distant planet.

Gravemind laughed. "_Can humans and Reclaimers stop my onslaught? Can Earth stop me from reaching my goals? From the grave I did rise, to the grave shall your precious world return. Here is where it all began, and here is where it will end."_

"You can't!" Cortana screamed.

"_You divided your data to stay at my side, to fool the humans that you so love, but now, with all the knowledge I have shared with you, you still think that my patience can be tested. Construct, you are far too young to blind my eyes."_

"This battle isn't over, you over grown flesh pot! I will stop you!"

"_Can you stop what you once created? I think not."_

****To be continued.****

2. 3 Faces of War

****Key NOTES:**

> _As of "GHOST OF ONYX", these rules apply to the Side Story Trilogy;

> A) Spartan 087 (Kelly) and Doctor Halsey are not on ONYX (Though the Events of Onyx have occurred.
 B) Time Difference is off by 5 days

> _ B-1) Time shifted due to Seed Ship Traveling in slip space. Time Paradox.

> C) William (spartan 043) is not dead.
 D) The Spartan III training program on ONYX is the result of what Ackerson's team discovered while testing on human subjects on Troy.

> _ D-1) Resulting in the creation of the Black Ops

>

More notes as thy become relative.

* * *

>Level 2: 3 Faces of War

Camp Eden

> Command Bunker #12 / Civilian Refugee Camp

> Central Egypt
 October 29, 2552 // 22:53 hours

Steam filled the private washroom of Major Elizabeth Rawlings; Head of Artifacts and Forerunner Technology Research. Although the figure in the shower was not of an elderly woman that had been highly decorated by the ONI brass, instead the figure was well toned and much younger. The woman turned off the water and stepped out of the shower; wrapping herself in a full sized towel embroidered with the logo of the UNSC. She stepped gingerly across the cold metal floor of the wash room and wiped the steam from the nearby mirror.

Roselyn Santos always knew she was an attractive woman, but it had been years since she had seen herself with a short haircut. It was the requirement of the military that female haircuts were no longer then necessary. It was a nice look, and helped add more definition to her facial features. She wanted to fight, she wanted to be in the war and do her part to protect her home. Rose had helped save Camp Eden from an invading group of Brute wraith patrols, a task that involved disobeying orders but it was something that needed to be done. However, now that she was in the heart of ONI Section III she didn't think that rejoining the fight could be possible.

"Rose." A male voice carried from the hallway. "I have you uniform."

"I'll be out in a sec." She casually replied. "Wesley, can you thank the Major again for me?"

"I'm not your errand boy, Rose."

She hung her head and sighed, but quickly stepped toward the wash room door. She flung it open wildly, glaring at the young Private that had been stuck to her side since she was first forced into active duty. "Do you think I want this? What part of this is my fault, Wesley?"

"Cut it out, Rose. You damn well know what this is about." Wesley turned his head, forcing himself not to stare down at Rose's partially naked form; her towel barely covering her full figure features.

"Frankly, Wesley, I don't. I thought we were past this." Rose quickly realized that her towel was loosely falling off of her. She grabbed her uniform from Wesley and quickly stepped back into the wash room. "You know how I feel about Eric. So why are you acting like this now?"

Wesley leaned against the wall, his thoughts racing back to the moment they watched Eric and the Black Ops leave Camp Eden's gate. "Trust me Rose, I wish it were that easy. Do you think I want to feel this, now? I don't. I asked to be reassigned to a different squad and Major Rawlings declined it."

"Then be angry with her, not me." Rose stepped out of the washroom, wearing the UNSC Naval Officers Uniform. The light gray and white jumpsuit was a tight fit. "Damn it, you'd think somebody in the military would design uniforms for mature women."

"There aren't many women in the Navy quite like you, Rose." Wesley grinned, almost blushing as he gazed at Rose. The uniform clung to her every curve. "Inside the suit, under your left and right armpits,

there are adjustable lines. Give it some slack and it should give you more breathing room across the top."

Rose reached inside and adjusted the strap; sure enough it allowed her more room across the chest. "Thanks."

"It's funny seeing you in Navy Officers uniform. I was getting use to seeing you in ODST fatigues."

Rose quickly began to walk the short hall back to Major Rawlings office. "Believe me, I'd rather be in marine gear right now. I guess my service to ONI isn't complete."

"You would still be a civilian if you hadn't given the Covenant that Crystal." Wesley snorted.

"Thanks for reminding me of my treachery to humanity, Wesley. You're such a nice guy for doing that. Besides, I was never a real civilian. ONI owns me until they are officially done with the Mark VI project." Rose and Wesley turned the corner and glared into the cold stare of Major Elizabeth Rawlings.

She sat motionless at her desk while holding a data pad. "Be thankful he reminded you of your sins, Ms. Santos. As far as I'm concerned I don't want you to ever forget the error of your ways." She had overheard the conversation.

"Yes Ma'am." Rose stated softly.

Major Rawlings looked to Wesley. "Doctor Halsey told me that you handled yourself very well on the Elite's Seed Ship. Section III has more questions for you. Report to level 41."

"I already made my report, ma'am."

"Get out, Private." Rawlings berated. "Or do you want me to suddenly remember how you failed to protect my Crystal, from the hands of your Ex-lover?"

Wesley snapped to attention. "No, Ma'am!" He quickly turned and walked out of the room. Rose felt the coldness flowing off of Major Rawlings. She was a woman born to lead, and her countless years of service to ONI had made her one of the most feared and criticized women in office.

Rose had never met the Major before the crystal incident in New Mombasa, but during her work on the Mark VI project she had seen her name on several forms and data spreads. Rose suddenly recalled how the Major wanted to put her in front of a firing squad, and a cold lump formed in the back of her throat.

Major Rawlings stood from her seat, dropped her data pad on the desk, and approached Rose. "When I first met you in Mombasa, I thought for sure I was sending you to die. I charged you with an impossible mission, put you under the care of a man that I personally knew would fail, but not even I knew that Lieutenant Eric Raynord was the infamous Black Ops 19." Rawlings paced around the room, circling Rose as if she were a dieing lamb waiting to be slaughtered. "In my eyes, you, Eric and Wesley are traitors, and we should have executed you on the spot! However, not only did you survive your mission, you brought

back half of the Elite population to our aid. Admiral Hood wants to put a medal on your chest, if humanity survives that long. And even I have to be thankful for your actions yesterday in defending Camp Eden.

"Ms. Santos. I do not care about the whimpering moans of that love sick puppy that is stuck to your side. He's what, ten years younger than you? Private Wesley Williams was a top Section III agent until he crossed your bed. If you were a spy, I'd say well done, but your motives were simple and stupid."

Rose was foaming under her tight lips. "Permission to speak, ma'am?"

"You'll speak when I tell you too!" The major snapped. "Wesley was charged the task of making sure that you did not leak any secrets of the Mark V and VI project. He did his job, but sadly you wooed him enough to prevent him from killing you when he should have. And then there is Lieutenant Raynord; head of Security at the New Mombasa ONI facility where you and he reunited. You had his head spun so wildly in college that even after all of his years in the military, he still couldn't get over you."

Major Rawlings walked to a mounted picture hanging on her office wall. "Do you see what I'm getting at, Rose? Your father, Patrick Santos, was a major UEG political figure. Although there were rumors that he was also smuggling weapons to Rebel Factions."

Rose blankly stared at Major Rawlings. "What? This has nothing to do with my Father, or those false accusations that he—"

"False, Ms. Santos? No, I did my homework, and your Father was smuggling weapons to the Rebels. Although, in his defense he stated that he was doing it so that they could fight back against the Covenant. Are you aware that he agreed to those charges?"

Rose was taken back. "No—I hadn't heard anything about that. You're lying!"

"Do you know how we deal with traitors, Rose? We shoot them."

Rose caught her breath as she stared wide eyed at the Major, "Did you—"

"Yes Rose, ONI Section III killed your father for the benefit of humanity. And now I am accusing you of following in his footsteps."

This was a bad dream, it had to be. Rose's vision began to blur, her eyes filling with tears of burning hatred. Her hands trembled uncontrollably as her heart raced out of control. Her father was everything to her and his death changed her life.

"Rose, there is no longer a need to deny your involvement. How long have you been cooperating with the Covenant? Or is it the Rebels that have put you under this ploy? Did you transmit Earth's coordinates to them upon discovering the Forerunner Crystal's location? Who else is involved with your plan of revenge?"

Rose crumbled to her knees, holding her sides as if she couldn't

breathe. "I neverâ€¦ no. I didn't do anything."

"Tell me the truth, Rose. Tell me what you did. There is nothing to be afraid of now, I'll simply assign you to a front line platoon, and put a gun in your hand. You'll die in combat, but at least you will have done something positive for humanity."

Rose screamed. "I'm not a traitor!" She lifted her head, with a snarling stare.

Major Rawlings stood six-foot-five, and for a woman closely approaching her late sixties she was still an impressive sight. Rose was no where near her stature, but she was young, strong, and a natural athlete. Major Rawlings could sense the urge for her to attack.

"I know what your thinking, Rose. Do not let my age fool you. I am quite capable of defending myself."

"You killed my fatherâ€¦"

"I didn't kill anyone. The department did, I just happen to be a part of that department."

Rose sobbed, "I survived. So what? That doesn't make me a traitor. It's not my fault that I lived. I didn't do anything. Eric protected me, he wouldn't let me fight. He kept me in safe places whenever he could. I didn't do anythingâ€¦ nothing. I was useless."

Major Rawlings turned to the picture on the wall once again. "I understand my dear, you've been kept in a jar this whole time. I knew that, I read the mission debriefing."

"Then why are you accusing me of being a traitor?" Rose sobbed.

"Section III must know the limits of everyone. We must know what buttons to push when we need to know something. With you, it was your father, and you told me all I needed to know." Major Rawlings turned from the picture and helped Rose to her feet. "I wanted to push your buttons because if you are going to wear that uniform, you will need to learn restraint. ONI is not in the business of accepting middle aged women who can't keep their pants on. And you, my dear, have more emotional baggage than a class six star freighter. You are what I call 'a bad seed', but Section III needs you. And despite my aversion to you, they want you regardless."

"You mean you were joking?"

"I do not joke, Ms. Santos." Rawlings pulled a pin from her pocket and affixed it to Rose's left shoulder. "Everything I said was the truth. Section III was directly involved in the death of your Father, it was a statement to the Rebels. As for why I told you, it is because I want you to know that I control the fate of your life, and I will not allow you to make another mistake that could jeopardize the safety of the human race."

Major Rawlings stepped away from Rose and she stood at full attention. "Do not forget that you gave away the Crystal, the Key to the Ark. If I feel that you are once again questioning your loyalty

to humanity, I will personally put my side arm to your temple and pull the trigger. Warrant officer Santos, this promotion is the only way that I can clearly grant you permission into the Box. You are officially ONI Section III. Come with me."

Silently Rose followed as Major Rawlings led her to an elevator. She had nothing to say to the Major, as she was well within her means to kill her. But Rose wondered why she needed her if she hated her so much? In the elevator stood three men, heavily armed with body armor Rose had never seen before. The soldiers stood silently and never flinched, even when she stared at their reflective masks. They were Major Rawlings personal bodyguards, and there were none like them on Earth. They were a special gift from Colonel Ackerson, something he had been working on for quiet some time, and proof that the Halsey's Spartans were not the only means to win this war. The elevator descended for several minutes until they reached the bottom.

Rose and Major Rawlings stepped off the elevator. "Guards, we are the last to descend. Lock down the elevator when you arrive at the top. Wait for my orders."

"Sir." The three guards saluted. The door closed and the Major led Rose down another series of paths. These halls were very empty, only a sparse number of ONI officers walked about.

"Gibson." Major Rawlings stated allowed.

A voice returned over the hallway intercom. "Go ahead Major."

"Add Warrant Officer Santos's ID tag and profile to your database. She'll be assigned to the Box until her duty is complete."

"Understood Major."

The hallway soon opened too reveal a small cave. Light fixtures outlined the cave walls as workers dug mindlessly about the room. Major Rawlings stopped and examined the area.

"Ma'am, what's going on?" Rose questioned.

"We need you Rose. That's what's going on. Four Hundred years ago, we discovered the cave which we now call Camp Eden; the cave that you saw when you first arrived. This smaller cave was discovered a few years later, we are directly beneath the center of the main cave above. ONI and The Egyptian Conservatory, studied this cave for nearly eighty years, but without any luck of uncovering what it is. This cave, you see, is not what you think it is. It contains fossil records of creatures never before discovered on Earth. For the sake of our own sanity, everything in this cave was considered top secret."

"Understandable. That would reshape human history as we know it." Rose stated as she examined a fossil outcropping on a nearby wall.

"What do you see?"

"Fossil remains of Elite?" Rose stepped back in shock. "An Elite?"

"Don't worry, it gets even more complicated." Major Rawlings descended deeper into the cave, passing several workers and approached a large black wall. "This is the Box. It is man made by the Egyptian Conservatory team that found it. They built this wall here to preserve what they found on the other side. This area was considered a shrine, until roughly a month ago." The wall was pitch black and smooth to the touch.

"Major, I'm an engineer not a Paleontologist. I'm no good to you down here."

Major Rawlings pushed open the door and they proceeded inside the Box. "Rose, you are the head of the MJOLNIR Mark VI program. You built the armor for the Spartans. Trust me, you are in the right place."

Rose followed. "Major, I built the armor based on ONI specs. I made a few changes but it is mostly the same design."

"Correct." Another voice stated as the inner door parted. Doctor Catherine Halsey held the door open as Rose and Major Rawlings approached. "The design was far more human then what was originally thought of. After several attempts to copy the technology we decided to take gradual steps to reaching the desired goals. The Mark I - III were more clumsy and impractical but they served their purpose. Besides, not until my Spartans came along did we have anyone that could wear them. The Mark IV came exceptionally close to what we needed, but when the Project MJOLNIR committee found youâ€ they found something special."

"It is a pleasure to see you again, Doctor." Rose smiled, thankful to finally see a familiar face.

"Like wise." Halsey returned.

Rose questioned. "You said you attempted to copy the technology. You mean the Mark V design was not created by ONI?"

Doctor Halsey reached into her jumpsuit pocket and pulled out her dusty and smeared glasses. "The specs we gave you to design the Mark V and then the Mark VI, were originally based on this." The group turned the corner and before them stood a tree, a large tree sprouting leaves that could not possibly grow in such an ungrateful environment; miles beneath the Earth's surface. Rose was stunned to see the tree, but something else caught her eyes, something far more related to her expertise.

"Are those?" She gasped.

"Yes Rose." Catherine Halsey smirked. "Nearly three hundred and twenty years ago, eighty years after the main cave was found, humanity found the Tree of Life. I've never been a follower of Religion, but I feel that the Biblical connection is a good reference. It is a bio-mechanical tree. The group that has been studying it reported that it 'activated' nearly thirty-eight days ago. And those two figures that have captured your eyes are the reasons why we decided to build the MJOLNIR."

Rose wasted no time, nearly running into the stone carved room.

Intricate Forerunner designs were etched into the floor, symbols along the wall, and even the Bio-mechanical tree seemed to represent Forerunner technology. But Rose was not concerned for the tree, at least not yet, for now her attention was captured by the two human shaped figures kneeling at the base of the tree. They faced outward, away from the tree, kneeling on one knee, with their heads bowed in an honoring display. One was a male and one was a female. But the two figures were clad in battle armor; perfectly preserved battle armor.

"Can I touch them?" Rose questioned in a child like awe.

"Yes, but be careful." Doctor Halsey questioned. "A crew is studying their connection to the Tree."

She ran her fingers along the edges of the suits, examining every inch of them. "The suits are air tight, the joints are genius. The design is inspiring!" She looked to the back of the female's suit. "This power unit is closer to my Mark VI design, but it's odd. It is almost as if they don't have internal power. What do we know about them?"

"We know that they are nearly one hundred thousand years old." Halsey stated.

"But that's not older then caveman fossils." Rose pondered.

Doctor Halsey grinned. "Correct, however, this technology should not have existed on Earth at that time."

"Right, I see your point." Rose examined the suits more. "Have they been opened?"

"These particular suits have not." Rawlings added. "We found our study sources from elsewhere."

Catherine Halsey calmly added. "The Ark I presume?"

Stunned, Major Rawlings glared at the women at her side. "Yes Doctor Halsey. It would seem you are well versed in the Forerunner lore. The suit we've been studying was found in the Ark, though it was badly damaged do to excessive use. We wanted to keep these two suits in tact, but we feel that is no longer a requirement. Rose, you have our permission to do what you must in order to understand how these suits work and implement what you can into the existing Mark VI Spartan armor."

"Litran and Bitran." Doctor Halsey said.

"What's that?" Rose questioned in return.

"Their names. From what I understand of the writings on the wall, they were called Reclaimers; the last Generals of the Forerunner Empire."

Rose turned to Major Rawlings, "Any chance that my gauntlets were recovered from the New Mombasa facility?"

"Yes, Spartans 104 and 43 have already received the updated gauntlets. We were able to salvage several of them before the

Covenant invasion. Spartans 087, 058 and 117, have yet to receive the updates because of their current mission.

"I'll need a full tech setup, three data pads, various power uplinks, and someone who knows how to handle high radiation material. If I had the right supplies, I could fabricate parts. Just by looking at these suits, I see where I went wrong on a few designs. The power flow of the arms and legs is directly correlated to the suits abdominal servos. I can boost leg and hand power by â€| ten percent maybe. I know what to do, I just don't have the tools to build them here."

"My my, you do know your stuff." Catherine smirked as she pushed her glasses up on her nose.

Major Rawlings turned away from the group. "I had Songnim transfer all their resources to Camp Eden when the second wave of Covenant ships arrived on Earth. You'll have the full cooperation of their staff at your disposal. Also, there have been some weapons upgrades in the past few days, be sure to update the database accordingly, Rose. Doctor Halsey, you can stay as long as you need, but the Flood data is needed on Level 41." The major opened the door to the Box and watched as Rose happily examined the two Reclaimer's armors. Doctor Halsey sat hovered over her shoulder, both of them as excited as two children that had been given new toys. Yet Major Rawlings did not agree to their enthusiasm.

"All my life I have protected this shrine." She thought to herself. "Forgive me for allowing them to dishonor your holly resting place, but for us to survive we must Reclaim what we have lost." Major Rawlings walked out of the Box with a heavy weight upon her heart.

"I can do this." Rose happily cheered to herself. "I can do something useful." She was happy beyond compare. She wished that the ONI security nuts had let her see the suits before the war had started, she was sure that things would have been different, and the Mark V and VI could have been one man armies. But she couldn't bark over facts she couldn't changed. She thoroughly examined the suit and was assisted by Doctor Halsey for nearly an hour, but soon Catherine had to leave. Several tech officers arrived with a massive load of material for her to use and she began to work. "Eric." Rose thought to herself. "I'm doing itâ€| I'm being useful."

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Black Ops Crash Site
> Central Africa
 October 29, 2552

Eric tasted blood, but he wasn't sure if that was the reason why he was waking up, it could have also been the intense pain rolling throughout his head. Face down in a puddle, Eric slowly pulled in his arm, testing to see if anything was broken. Arms were okay, neck felt intact, legs were hurting but moveable, and with that he rolled over and opened his eyes, blood stained his mask; a large amount of blood.

He reached up and unlatched the seal to his helmet, only to find that it had completely split open. Cold water dripped onto his neck and sent a chill down his back; whatever the damage was it appeared

mostly external as his senses and nerves were still in one piece. He pulled the helmet off to get a better look at the damage to it, and as he examined it he realized that it was a miracle he was still alive. His helmet must have taken the majority of the impact.

"How long was I out?" He questioned aloud. He dropped the helmet, let the cool water of the small pond wash over the back of his head and gazed into the twilight sky. Was it morning or late afternoon? Eric had no idea of time. He motioned to sit up, but his blood pressure was too low, he became increasingly dizzy as he rose, and was forced to lie back down. "Lost too much blood." He softly whispered.

Eric sat motionless, fighting the urge to lose consciousness again. He had to stay awake. He had to live. He didn't want to die like this, alone and separated from his team. Avoiding death was what he had done for so long, so many times he was on the edge of battle and yet walked out with only a few scratches and bruises, but this was not a firefight. He was not going to let his last enemy, a plane crash, be his end. But no matter how hard he fought it, he couldn't overcome his body's need to reserve energy. In mid thought, his body went numb, his heart slowed, and he slipped into darkness.

"Eric?" Kim's voice radiated in his ears. Kim sat in front of him, as beautiful as the day he had first met her. She held a sniper rifle in her hand, with the barrel pointing upward, and the stock resting on the floor. She was cleaning the weapon, though she was covered in sweat and out of uniform. He remembered this moment. It was the Tylon campaign, the first mission the Black Ops had been assigned. Tylon was a hot desert world, primarily a mining colony and was at one time filled with colonists, but like so many worlds, it was one of the first worlds to be erased by the Covenant. Kim was wearing a large white shirt, stained in sweat, with her black fatigues unbuttoned to her waistline. The rest of the squad was on patrol with Melanie 05, leaving Kim and Eric alone. It was a welcome break, and one of the very few times that they had to spend together; as they struggled to keep their relationship a secret.

"You look like you haven't been doing to well." Kim continued. She stood up, and placed the gun to the side. Her face was dirty, smudged with grease and sweat. "Is the heat getting to you? We should probably get you out of those clothes then, eh?" Kim smiled, looking at him seductively. Eric wanted to talk, but the words wouldn't escape his lips. Kim reached out and grabbed the base of his shirt, and began to slide it upward over his head. He felt at peace in this moment, happy to see Kim again, before her untimely death. This was a good time, even in the midst of the war, he was happy. He pulled the shirt from his head, and looked at the woman before him.

Kim was gone, replaced by the woman that had always captured his fantasy. "Will you teach me how to fight, Eric?" Rose questioned. Roselyn Santos was taller than Kim, but their build was almost identical. Rose's Spanish complexion was strikingly alarming, as well as her fully endowed features. Yet something wasn't right, Rose was not with the Black Ops on Tylon, she was busy working on the Mark V program while on Earth. No, something wasn't right at all. His dreams were being jumbled, but was this a dream?

Rose leaned in toward him, kissing him softly on the forehead. "Don't let me stay in this war without knowing how to fight." She pulled away and lifted a gun, a small pistol, and placed it into Eric's

hand. She slowly came closer to Eric again, this time with her eyes closed and lips puckered as if to receive a kiss. Eric slowly obliged, closing his eyes and pressing his lips against hers. The embrace was filled with passion and he pulled back, thankfully for the sudden sign of affection, but once again the woman had changed.

Melanie smiled happily back toward him. "This is life, and Kim would want you to move on. She knows how I feel about you."

Eric awoke to the thump of metal meeting metal. He rolled his head to the side and noticed that he was no longer lying in a puddle of water, but he was bandaged and resting inside the twisted hull of a Pelican. Someone had found him. He was alive, and his dream was most likely the result of him blacking out. The banging was coming from outside and he watched as two figures walked past.

It was night out, and a soft rain was falling in the area. Eric sat up slowly, but again became too dizzy to rise. A hand cradled his head and eased him back to his metal resting place.

Melanie glanced into his eyes. "You lost a lot of blood, but we were able to stabilize you. You need to rest. We don't know when we'll get picked up, and I wasn't able to find another med kit. Do you understand me?"

"Yeah." Eric grumbled. He was happy to see her, though he struggled hard to push the dream out of his mind. "Where are we?"

"Unknown. The Pelican is fried; zero communications uplink. We barely have short range signals. 08 is out gathering supplies and looking for more med kits. The Marines are working on trying to figure out our position, and the ODST is digging a trench in case the wrong search team finds us."

"What about you?"

"Fit as a fiddle." She smirked. "I blacked out on impact, but nothing a good slap to the face didn't solve."

"No really. How are you doing, Mel? It's me, Eric, not 19. Right now I'm not your CO, and we aren't Black Ops. I'm your friend."

Melanie smiled as she looked down at Eric. "You should know better then to ask a girl a question like that. Thank God I'm a tomboy. If it wasn't for that I'd be crying my eyes out right now." She chuckled softly. She noticed that she was toying with Eric's bandages; girlishly fidgeting. She clinched her fist to shake of the childish behavior.

"And why would you be crying your eyes out?"

Melanie looked away. "I lost my sister not too long ago, Eric. I don't think I can handle losing you in the same year." She quickly looked back down at Eric. "But that would only bother me if I wasn't so much of a tomboy." She quickly stood. "Orders, 19?"

Orders, she asked. They were once collegiate friends and Eric had dated her older sister. But on top of all of this were the unspoken words that existed between them. It was not as complex as flirting,

nor was it as simple as a familial bond. Melanie and Eric had experienced many sensations together; happiness, loss, heartbreak, and pain. For them, nothing could be as simple as giving in to their emotions, but for them there was no option in doing this. Eric understood that there was no way Melanie would ever step over Kim's grave.

Eric looked up at Melanie from the corner of his eyes. "We camp here tonight. Tomorrow, we make our way to a marker and try to find our position." Eric coughed. "Until I'm a hundred percent, tell 08 to take control of things."

"08?" Melanie questioned. "But I â€| " She paused and gathered herself. "Yes sir. I'll let him know."

Melanie turned to walk outside but Eric had one last statement. "It's not that I don't think you can handle it, 05. I just don't know where your head is right now. And if I need to be left behind, I don't want you wasting time trying to figure out a way to bring me along." Melanie exited the Pelican and remained silent.

The next morning, Mathew 08 shouldered his rifle. With only a half clip of rounds and three spare side arm clips, he gathered his small team. Melanie would have to be his point man for everything; she was Black Ops and the fastest of them all. The ODST would be level headed, even if he lost his edge. The two marines were debatable; they would keep pace, but lacked any firefight experience. The pilot would be essentially non-com. He could hold a weapon, but Mathew had serious doubts if he could hit anything with it.

"Private John and Jackson, you two are to watch over the Sergeant during transport. 08, you have point." He turned to the ODST and the Pilot. "Corporal, you'll pull up the rear with our flyboy. We're headed east toward that mountain range." Mathew pointed off to the distant small range of mountains. "While I was falling yesterday, I spotted a city just over the first peak, should be about ten clicks or less. Get the gurney, check your water supply and let's move out."

The ODST replied back, "Chief, are you sure it's good idea moving him? If we leave the Pilot here with him, they'll have plenty of water, and we can move twice as fast."

"I considered that, Corporal Hall. But I also know that Black Ops never leave a man behind, especially when he's still breathing." He looked over the unbalanced squad and waved them forward. "Move out." If the situation was different, Corporal Hall would have been right. ODSTs understood squad loyalty, but in a pinch they would leave a man behind if it meant jeopardizing the squad. But ODST were use to be dropped behind enemy lines, under weapons fire, and usually being pursued; this wasn't the case.

Hours passed, yet the distance traveled seemed to only grow by a few inches. It took the group twice as long as they had thought to reach the foothills of the mountains. They had not crossed any roads, or found any trails. The jungle plains were spruce with vegetation, but the humidity was taxing them. They pushed on, each of them knowing that Sergeant Raynord needed medical treatment. They finally arrived at the base of the cliff side.

"05, I need you to recon ahead and get to the peak, we'll set up camp here tonight. See if you can get a clear view to the other side or receive any short wave transmissions."

"I'm on it." Melanie downed a quick shot of water and bagged her container. She turned and double timed it to the base of the small rocky outcropping. Nighttime was quickly concealing the area in darkness, but she didn't let that slow her down. She pulled on her helmet, switched to night vision and climbed feverishly fast. Even though she could have taken her time, Eric's condition wasn't improving and she didn't want to waste any time. The more she could do, and the faster she could do it, the better Eric's chances were. She hustled up the steep incline, a rough one-hundred foot climb, and settled at the top. The peak was more of a plateau, and directly in front of her was a row of weathered buildings; an abandoned observatory surrounded by a worn metal fence.

She powered up her short range communicator. "05, this is Recon. Area seems clear, no hostiles sighted. I found an abandoned complex, looks like an old space observatory."

"_Be careful up there, 05."_ Mathew returned on the line. _"Scope the area out, see if you can find any med kits or a clue to our location, and get back down here. ASAP."_

"Roger that." Melanie pulled up her side arm, thumbed the safety off and primed a round in the chamber. She duck walked forward, through bushes and the aging fence. Her active motion tracker showed no signs of movement; friendly or hostile. She neared the outer wall of the first building, the walls were covered in foliage, and most of the windows were smashed out. She motioned around a corner and neared the door. She pried it open but it was hard to open. With her augmented strength she gave it a good tug, and it crumbled away from the hinge, falling to the grassy patch at her feet. The sound echoed throughout the building and caught the attention of something inside; her tracker pinged with motion. She quickly slipped inside and into the dark cover of the hallway.

"Shit." She cursed, stealing a line from Eric. She got low, dropping to a knee and keeping her eyes peeled on the area. She pulled a frag-grenade and held it tightly in her left hand just in case. She felt better with the dangerously volatile high explosive charge in her hand. There was something soothing about it that she never quite understood.

Her nearly all black modified ODST armor vanished in the dark corner of the first room. She kept her gun level, making sure to not let anything slip by her vision. Trusting in the motion trackers was never acceptable, because if an enemy stood still they would be invisible to the tracker. The Black Ops learned long ago not to put all of their faith in their technology. She crept forward, scanning each room with her gun. The building was only a shell of its former self, as Melanie could clearly see that the each room once served some very important purpose. She found an old booklet full of paper, it was weathered and torn. On the hinge were the words, "Mukutan Observatory Grid station: 2319 Febuary. Mukutan?" She pondered the name, as it sounded very familiar to her. "That would put us in Kenya. But where in Kenya are we?" She pocketed the book and continued to scan the rooms.

Melanie noticed that the object on her tracker was beginning to move toward her, perhaps along the main corridor, and she ducked into an open door, and cautiously closed it behind her; leaving only a crack open. She paused in the darkness as the object came closer. It was moving at a casual pace, but she had to remain cautious. She targeted the opening and waited for it to pass by.

There were heavy footsteps, almost muffled along the stone floor. She listened closely, letting the repeating steps echo in her ear. She wasn't sure what it was. "Wildlife? A big cat? No, it's more like boots. Military grade, or civilian?" No, she knew the sounds of human footsteps and this was not human or animal.

Her eyes widened as the thick brown fur of a Brute paused at the door. He was heavily armored, with a massive hammer strapped to his back. This Brute was packing some very serious armament. Unlike the Brutes she had fought against during the Camp Eden defensive, this brute wore battle armor, this was undocumented and odd. These fierce warriors that attacked Earth were now completely new.

The massive beast stuck his nose into the air, sniffing strongly. Melanie knew that this was a bad sign.

The Brute roared. "Wake the others. I smell a€| flesh. Call the front lines and get my warriors back here."

Another blip appeared on Melanie motion tracker, and a voice echoed in the background. "Yes, Chieftain." Her helmet audio language decoder couldn't have made such a mistake, but she was sure he couldn't have meant 'Chieftain'. Melanie thought for sure that the Arbiter reported that the Brute Chieftain, Tartarus, was dead.

Melanie gazed through the door as the Brute angled his head toward the door. He pushed it open and snarled at the human that sat before him.

"How you doing, ugly?" Melanie whipped. She pocketed her sidearm, it was useless against a Brute, and pulled down her Battle Riffle.

"Die human worm!" The Brute snarled. He gripped the handle of his hammer and readied himself.

Melanie turned her back to the Brute, lunged toward the wall, and prayed that it was as weak as the rest of the building. She crumbled through the degrading wall and rolled to a knee. She was outside, on the western side of the building. She looked back and watched as the Brute stepped into the hole after her.

"Gotcha." The grenade she had once held in her hand exploded under the Brutes feet, severing his leg as he fell backwards. The Brute's blood splattered over the walls as he screamed in agony. She aimed her rifle and easily put three rounds through his chin. The BR-55 rounds exited the top of his skull. He was dead, but clearly he had alarmed the rest of the camp. Melanie looked to the opposite side of the building and watched as several vehicles powered up. Her exit and explosion had put her in plain sight of a Brute camp. Jackals squawked in the distance, ghosts hummed to life, and stampeding Brutes raced toward her.

She looked at her rifle ammo count, Twenty-five rounds. She only had one clip. She turned and ran, but not toward her squad, instead she ran parallel to the cliff. She couldn't lead them back to Eric. She put her full speed to the ground and beat-feet as fast as she could. She checked her tracker; it was glowing brightly for a moment but then stopped. She maintained her forward progress but looked over her shoulder and saw that she wasn't being chased. A few Jackals appeared, but without the Brutes, and the Jackals were not going to give chase without their superiors. Melanie dropped a knee and slid along the ground until she was perfectly on her belly. She looked back and zoomed in with her helmet binoculars.

"They're fighting over his armor?" She was stunned at this. The Brutes didn't care about her at all, and were fighting over who would be the next in command. Each of the Brutes were snarling at each other as they each attempted to pick up the hammer. A Jackal was glaring at her from the side of the building; they always had the best vision of the Covenant forces. Melanie leveled her rifle, put down the lone Jackal, and sprinted to the side of the plateau so that she could send a clear signal to the squad.

"08, this is Recon, you copy?"

"_Crystal clear, 05. Status?"_

"Brute base camp at the top of the plateau. Theirâ€| Cheiftain, is down. But, they are not pursuing me."

"_Chieftain? Repeat that, 05?"_

"I'll explain later. I am taking an alternate route away from our camp in case they send a team after me. I will rendezvous at the southern pass around the mountain at twelve hundred hours tomorrow."

"_Not an option 05. You get back here now, we'll fight it out together if they do give chase."_

"Negative. I can not jeopardize the safety of the squad. I will meet you all on the southern side of the cliff tomorrow at noon. Confirmed we are in Mukutan, Kenya. Recon out!"

"Melanie?" Mathew shouted into his com, but there was no answer. She had moved out of range of the short wave com. "Damn it!"

Eric lifted his head and looked at Mathew. "Status?"

"Recon has gone solo. Possible Brute pursuit. She didn't want to lead them back here. I'm going to go assist." Mathew gripped his rifle and adjusted the straps on his gear.

"Negative, 08. She made the right choice. If she felt that the odds were against us, then she made the right call."

"But Sergeant?"

Eric held his head to ease the constant thumping. "I don't like it anymore then you do, 08, but it was the right call. She's faster then the Brutes, and in the dark she'll become practically invisible if she decides to play hide and seek. This is Melanie we're talking

about. She's Black Ops. She trained in stealth just like we did. You go after her and you'll only be attracting more attention."

Mathew stood motionless and lowered his head. The other men in the squad watched in silence, until the ODST intervened.

"Sirs, hate to bring this up, but if the Brutes are spooked, we should probably get moving. They may search the area." Corporal Hall gazed upward to the top of the cliff side, thumbing his BR-55 nervously.

"You're right Corporal." Mathew sulked. "Johns, Jackson, grab the Sergeant and lets move south. 05 is on her own for now."

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Troop Supply Territory

> Camp Eden Civilian Defense Net
 Abu Simbel, Egypt

> October 30, 2552<p>

Three Phantoms hovered over the battle field and rained plasma over the area. Flood combat forms melted under their constant barrage, but the parasitic creatures did not fold so easily. Rocket Propelled Grenades puffed into the air, leaving the shoulder mounted grips of the fleshy tentacles of the Flood. One Phantom was struck dead center, but easily shook off the impact. The other Phantoms dodged the incoming RPGs and turned their turrets toward them.

The Flood had found Earth, but this was not the result of Gravemind's influence. These Flood forms found Earth by taking over Brute ships that escaped Delta Halo when the Prophet of Truth fled to Earth. The Flood followed Truth and the Brutes, but for what it was worth, the Human and Covenant Forces easily eradicated the threat, and these were the last reported Flood forces in Africa.

Less then a mile away, at the Abu Simbel airport, several Elite Field Masters continued to discuss the current situation.

"We have been successful in keeping the Flood threat out of the area, but this is only buying more time until the inevitable." The red armored Field Master stated to those that were gathered. "I have sent my scout teams to patrol the areas west and south of my stronghold, none returned. Keeping the flood out of this quadrant is futile." Several of the Field Masters agreed.

Another spoke up. "I too have lost countless warriors. Even the human aids that reported from the north were cut down before they could arrive. If the parasite pushes harder, they will easily take down this supply depot. Does not matter if their numbers are thinning, they can easily regain numbers if we loose warriors."

A silver armored elite stepped forward. "Warriors, we are not here to complain. We are here to find a more strategic option to defending this supply post. If we lose ground here, the humans will lose all means of mass supply transportations."

"The humans!" A Field Master roared. "Why should we bother to aid them? They are not warriors. We should be more concerned with our own. We have a ship in orbit carrying the last of our civilians. Our home is gone, we should be thinking of them not these lowly humans

who have never proven themselves in our eyes."

The door to the room opened and in walked the black armor clad warriors of the Spec Ops. Amongst them was a warrior wearing the helmet decorations of a Lieutenant. "If you are all done with your complaining, perhaps we can now get back to the task at hand."

"Lieutenant Simyaldee, we meant no disrespect, but the other Field Masters and I agree, the humans are not worth defending. We should begin evacuation of all our forces to the Seed Ship."

Simyaldee raised his eyes and looked to the decorated Field Master before him. He then returned his eyes to the display map on the table in the center of the room. "The western pass has been the most active in the past few hours. Shift units from post eighteen and nineteen to assist in covering it. Also, move a formation of wraiths along the river, there have been sightings of Flood activity along the southern banks. Notify the humans patrolling the roads to Camp Eden to tighten their patrols, as we will be forced to move more of our regiments closer to the area's defensive."

Simyaldee sat up and looked to the group of Field Masters. "I will not tolerate any further discussion of fleeing the combat zone. I will not have any more insubordination amongst my ranks. The humans are our allies just as much as we are theirs. That is all you need to understand. You have your orders."

The group of Field Masters nodded sharply and quickly exited the room to return to their posts. Simyaldee turned to the silver armor of the councilor amongst them, "Elder, forgive them."

"No, Lieutenant. Forgive me. I should have been the one to silence their pointless debate. It would appear that the news of Dorenth's destruction is affecting my warriors far worse than I could have predicted." The elder leaned over the holographic map of the region. "Your strategy is fool proof; you easily covered the one hole in our defensive. But will it be enough?"

"Time will tell, elder. The Arbiter and the Commander, against my recommendation, are off to secure the Flood crash site. We believe a brain form is within one of those ships. Killing that creature should prove to greatly affect the Flood within the region. Their numbers are decreasing, but for every warrior of ours they kill, they infect them and multiply. If the Arbiter is unsuccessful, I estimate the Flood will take this Region within the week. We can stall them if the humans provide support from the North, but that will only slow them down. The Flood will spread with every fallen soldier."

The elder smiled as he listened to Simyaldee's words. "The Commander was right in selecting you as the Mirrator Second. You are a brilliant warrior even in command situations."

"Sir, I recommend we move all transport vehicles to this point." Simyaldee ignored the Elder's praise and focused on resituating the troops. "We need to be ready to evacuate what troops and supplies we can if a new threat shows its head."

A series of beeps emitted from a local terminal, catching Simyaldee and the Elder's attention. Simyaldee quickly walked over the station

and powered on the Communications unit. An image of Lord Hood appeared on the visual display.

"Admiral Hood." Simyaldee stated.

"Where's the Arbiter." Lord Hood quickly questioned.

"He took it upon himself to lead the assault against the downed Flood cruisers."

"Very well. I need assistance. Our mission to infiltrate the Forerunner vessel ended in travesty. We lost more men than I would care to think about."

Simyaldee was aware that the honorable human, Eric Raynord, was one of the soldiers involved with this mission, as well as the Demon and his â€| Spartans. "The Demon, and the Black Ops?"

"If you mean the Master Chief, he survived, but as of right now we are not sure where the Black Ops are locatedâ€| if they made it. But to the point, we tracked the debris of the _Rogue Fantasy_, and it crashed several kilometers from the Supply post. I'm uploading the coordinates to you now. Two of our most powerful AI's are inside that debris. We need them back."

Simyaldee turned to the Elder, who gave him a solid nod of approval. "Admiral, I will personally lead a team to recover the Constructs."

"Thank you. Once you retrieve them, deliver them to Camp Eden. I'll send word to expect your arrival. My men will take over from there. Good luck." The transmission ended.

Simyaldee turned to the holographic terrain map and input the coordinates that Lord Hood had transmitted. The image shifted several miles south of the Supply Territory.

Simyaldee exhaled deeply. "Several Jiralhanae scout teams went missing in that sector yesterday. We were tracking them, thinking they were trying to flank our position, but they never returned."

"We have yet to see any Jiralhanae combat forms, so we must assume that they cleared the area." The Elder thought aloud. "You must understand that I can not allow you to take too many of our warriors on this mission."

"I fully understand, Elder. I will only take two soldiers with me."

"Two?" The elder questioned in shock. "That would be suicide, even for a Mirratord warrior such as you. Take a half platoon, we can spare that much."

"Do not fret, Elder. I will be taking two of my Mirratord brethren with me."

"I see. Then you will in fact be taking a full platoon." The Elder councilor laughed.

Simyaldee nodded to the Elder and walked from the building. "We shall return by morning." He quickly descended the stairs of the tower that overlooked the airfield. As he reached the base of the tower he turned to his two Mirrator'd Guards. "Remain here and protect the Elder with your lives.

"Sir." The two Mirrator'd Guards replied. They positioned themselves at the door as Simyaldee walked toward the Southern post. He watched as human heavy transport ships continuously landed along the airstrip. Human civilian workers filled the vehicles with weapons, food, water, and various all-terrain vehicles. The Abu Simbel supply territory provided troops with supplies from all around the world. Supplies weren't sent in and distributed to front line forces defending Camp Eden and the Ark, but the battle to control the Ark excavation sight was quickly being won by the Covenant.

Simyaldee turned his attention back to the task at hand, but a human raced up to his side. "Simyaldee!"

"What is it?" He questioned the non-warrior human.

"Sir, our supply shipment from New York was intercepted by a Brute Seraph Squadron. We lost communications with them ten minutes ago."

Simyaldee sighed at the news. "This is the third shipment today. Very well, tell your superiors that the Newâ€|York supply route is no longer safe. The humans of Newâ€|York should find another route here."

"They didn't tell you, did they sir? We lost communication with New York last night. This was the last transport to escape before the Brutes took over the region." The human hung his head. "We're all going to die."

Simyaldee understood the human's sadness, but he was not going to let the human forget his purpose. "You must not give up. You still have a job to do, and that is to protect this base and make sure that the supplies continue to run. If we lost Newâ€|York, then we must make sure that the rest of the Supply territories are made aware. Contact all supply ports and tell them to be on guard. The Jiralhanae are attempting to cut off our supplies." Simyaldee walked away as the human raced back to his post.

Simyaldee pressed his com and opened a channel, "Lieutenant Gridolee, meet me at southern post two."

On the southern point of the territory, four hundred grunts and less than twenty elites, held a line of impending Flood forms. Plasma grenades floated from the grunts hands, sailing close to a hundred yards into the heart of the flood charge. A wave of detonations swelled throughout the Flood numbers.

The sun slowly began to peep over the distant horizon as the grunts held their own. The Elites, scattered about the group, kept their eyes sharp as stationary turrets, wraith tanks, and needler rounds crisscrossed the field. Several Grunts watched as numerous combat forms raced into the area carrying heavy weapons, immediately demanding their full attention.

"Enemy rockets! Need help!" Shouted a frantic Grunt, and with good reason, as one accurate RPG could drastically change the battle formation to the Flood's advantage. From the rear of the Grunts formation walked a black armored Grunt, with the marks of a Sergeant crested upon his shoulder. However, the rank of Sergeant was not the only mark to grace him, as he was also proudly wearing the purple strips of the Mirratord.

The grunt eagle eyed the Floods frantic charge. "Target enemy's with the large weapons!" He shouted in the rough language of the Grunts. "Stationary guns, focus on incoming units."

The Grunt Sergeant then turned to the Elites at his side, and spoke in broken Covenant tongue. "Sangheili, form up on me. We get in close!"

For two days the Grunt Sergeant had been leading the defensive just south of the airfield, and for two days he had done his job without debate from any of the Elites under his command. This was not the role that most Elites were accustomed to, following the orders of a Grunt, but he was not a Grunt to be questioned. He was ferocious in battle and had earned the respect of the Elites, and his Grunt kin recognized him as their King; a Messiah.

The RPGs streaked into their formation, the Flood had begun another push. Try as they might, the front line of Grunts buckled and eventually broke under the Floods endeavor. The Grunts began to tremble, slowly feeling the urge to flee, but a lone Grunt charged into the attacking mass.

In Covenant tongue, "Engage enemy! Wraith units cover flank!" Palab, the King of the Grunts, roared as he sprinted on all fours into the mass of combat forms. Closely following him were several Elites. "Focus on Flood with rockets!"

An Elite racing behind Palab roared. "You heard the Sergeant! Advance!"

The line of Grunts that were at one time trembling, found a new layer of courage. They lifted their plasma pistols, needlers, and fuel rod cannons, and followed their leader into the battle.

The Flood, sensing the tidal change, froze in position. Their attack was now a defense as hundreds of Grunts cascaded into them with the unchallenged aggression of a rabid pack of wolves. The Flood fought back, killing two or three Grunts with their powerful tentacles. Yet when one Grunt fell to his death, three more instantly took his place. The powerful claws of the Grunts ripped the flesh off of the Flood mass; popping the frail infection forms inside. The Grunts gave the massive carrier forms more clearance, letting them pop on their own, and then swarmed in to kill the defenseless infections forms that spewed from the mass of decayed flesh.

Grunts screamed, Flood forms tumbled, and Elites roared in war like ecstasy. And in the heart of it all, the Grunt king flailed his retractable elbow spikes in rhythmic poetry. He dropped his plasma rifle long ago, after taxing out its initial charge. He pounced with controlled passion, cutting into the Flood combat forms chests and gutting the tiny infections forms. He did not want to fight the Flood hand to hand, strategically it was suicide because one flood tentacle

would be enough to seriously injure or kill him, but Palab had to rely on his quickness and agility because he was out of ammo.

An unlucky Grunt at Palab's side was slashed across the back, sending him lifelessly to the ground. His plasma grenades tumbled from his satchel and rolled onto the ground. Palab was unaware that he had fallen, and continued to cut into a nearby combat form. Several feet away, a Grunt discharged his needler's full clip causing a flood form to explode. The insinuating event caused a chain reaction in the plasma grenades nearby. Palab turned just as the first grenade ignited. With his battle sharpened focus he spun away, dug into the ground with his hands and pulled himself away from the exploding grenades. He planted his feet and kicked out; pushing himself away even faster. The concussion of the blast was still too fast, and quickly engulfed Palab in its blue haze. The four plasma grenades sent Grunts, Flood, and two Elites, screaming into the air.

Palab rolled to a stop, dazed and confused as dust settled around him. He gathered his barrings, shacking off the shock that had just swept over him. His breathing became rapid, and he clawed at his methane mask. Something wasn't right, and it was painfully obvious that his mixture of methane was malfunctioning. He was becoming increasingly lightheaded, that was the first sign; a bad sign. He checked his armor as he rolled onto his belly, and as he had feared his mixture was running low. His tank had ruptured and was leaking; luckily it hadn't exploded in the plasma flame. He quickly took in a deep breath, shut off his main valve, and switched to his reserve tank; he could breathe easily for two minutes.

He breathed in the warm methane and he let it fill his lungs. He quickly stood and inspected the battlefield. Everything within several yards was leveled, but the fight was still being waged in the distance; at least one area was secure. But there was no time to be thankful. Palab quickly raced to a deceased grunt nearby, checked his tank, and quickly removed his methane supply.

"Forgive me. Me must continue fight." Palab thought aloud in the patterned Covenant language. He dropped the new tank into his armor and powered on the main tank. He then began to gather weapons and grenades. Once his ammo was full he turned and sprinted toward the remaining Flood battle, as the Grunts cheered his return.

In the distance, Simyaldee was the lone passenger aboard his Specter all terrain vehicle, and he sped toward the smoldering battlefield which was Sergeant Palab's defensive station; Southern Post 2.

Explosions were igniting the early morning sky as he approached, but the battle clearly ended as he arrived in the area. Placement shields sparked off and on from power overloads. Grunts sat silently, numb to anything around them. Elites patrolled the chaotic battlefield, policing the dead Flood forms and torching them with human flamethrowers. Some Grunts were scanning the bodies of their fallen kin, looking for survivors where they were sure not to find any. It was a hellish sight of scorched earth, piles of decaying corpses and war torn warriors.

Simyaldee powered down the Specter and sprang to the dusty road. He cautiously scanned the area, looking for Palab or any of his Mirratord units. Sure enough, he spotted the unmistakable size of the

Grunt King, and several of his disciples. Palab was a full head taller than his Grunt kin, his size masking his strength and intelligence. Simyaldee even began to think that Palab had grown more in size since they had landed on Earth.

"Sergeant." Simyaldee stated as he approached the group. Palab held up the palm of his hand toward Simyaldee, halting him from saying anything else. Simyaldee hadn't noticed, but Palab and the other Mirrator Grunts were quietly sitting near a pile of dead Grunts. After a moment, the group stood and continued on as if nothing had happened.

Palab spoke to his kin in their language. "Seek out the others and offer up thanks to their sacrifice. I must speak with the Lieutenant. Mittab, you are in charge until I return."

Mittab, Palab's first disciple, eagerly nodded his approval and led the other Mirrator Grunts toward the numerous other piles of the dead. In many ways, Mittab had become a good substitute for Etah; Palab's older pack brother that had fallen in battle on the Elite's home planet. But the connection was not the same. While Etah was the older of the Pack, Mittab was young, and inexperienced in combat. Mittab had not survived the Brutes and the Flood of Delta Halo, but he did survive the battle on Dorenth. He had learned a lot from the Grunt King, and was a happy addition to his young pack, but he could never replace Etah.

Palab sniffed toward Simyaldee, "Me sorry, Sir. Me Grunts needed to â€| rest, for a moment."

'Rest', Palab had called it. Simyaldee huffed at the words, but he respected the Grunt's religious heritage. "You have no need to apologize for honoring the dead. I shall always respect the secrets of the Unggoy."

"You understand, but many not." Palab stated as he watched several Elites push past a pack of 'resting' Grunts. "When we rest, we dream of kin; deam of them as they play on our home world. This way, we not forget them."

Simyaldee also watched as the Elites ignored the resting grunts. "I wish there was more we could do, but for now we have a mission."

"You lead, me follow." Palab charged. He pressed his com, "Mittab, me go on mission with Second. Continue area sweep and refortify. Me be back soon."

Simyaldee also turned on his com wondering wear Gridolee had gotten to. "Lieutenant Gridolee, report to the southern post immediately." Within several minutes the massive warrior jogged to Simyaldee's side. Standing nearly six inches taller than the average Elite, and covered in dense muscles, Gridolee was an Elite unlike any other.

"Sir." Gridolee stated. "Forgive my delay. There was a commotion on the Eastern bank."

"Understood." Simyaldee looked to his two Mirrator brothers. "This will be a stealth mission. Check your camouflage status and ammo. The

three of us are going south. I will debrief you as we go."

"Sir!" Palab and Gridolee stated sharply. They quickly boarded the Specter, checked their gear, and the trio sped off into the wasteland.

****To be continued.****

3. Desperate Measures

****Level 3: Desperate Measures****

Mukutan, Kenya
> October 30, 2552<p>

Clouds lined the sky as the sun rose overhead. Distant thunder cracked as Mother Nature did her earthly duties. It was a dreary morning, humid and wet, but Melanie raced on. The muddy soil beneath her feet sloshed with every step. She had been running throughout the night and she needed to know how far she had run. With a quick thought her Heads-Up-Display flashed; fifteen miles from her last check point. She stopped, placed her hands to her hips to gather her breath, and then pulled the helmet from her head. The humid air quickly washed over her face, instantly causing her to sweat uncontrollably. She stood motionless in a wide open field, blankly gazing into the distance.

Melanie had covered the full range of the plateau. She had climbed down the back side and ran all the way around it, and had finally arrived at the squad rendezvous point. A quick calculation of her speed and distance, and comparing that to the squads slow pace, she figured that she arrived roughly a few hours ahead of them; and the ETA was noon. She turned her attention to the cliff of the plateau, gazing up its incline and making sure that the Brutes had not sent out a search team. Hopefully they went north, following her original path. Hopefully they wouldn't turn south and pick up her trail.

Hopefully.

A light mist of rain began to fall and Melanie lifted her head into the sky. She unbuttoned the top of her ODST armor to let the cool water wash over her. She sat down in the field, rocked backwards and rested in the tall grass. The squad would show up in a few hours, and the war would continue, but for now she was able to have a moment; a rarity not given in these harsh times. She pulled out her flask, and took a shot from the whisky contents and frowned when she realized it was empty. She closed it and looked at the engraved words; "Do or Die."

It was hard to believe that three weeks ago she was on the Elite home world, trying to help the same creatures that had killed her sister less than three months ago. The events of this year were weighing heavy on her mind, and nothing could wash it from her forethought. She recalled the events of that dreadful day. The Elites lob grenades into their position, and a grenade landed between Kim and several civilians. Melanie then watched as Kim gripped the boiling ball of plasma, it instantly bonded to her skin, and she ran out into the field. She had sacrificed herself in order to save a few

civilians.

Her big sister and leader of the Black Ops had died a hero, yet no one would ever know her sacrifice. The Black Ops, Black Operations Squad 011-Gamma, did not exist on any official document. Kim, Senior Chief Petty Officer Kimberly Peters, would never receive a medal of heroism, and her grave will be forever unmarked. But then there was the amalgamation of her consciousness and a machine; Siren.

Though she was dead, Kim was somewhat alive inside the processing power of a computer. Melanie rubbed her head in disbelief. What had the world come to? What had they signed up for? And who gave the military permission to map her big sisters mind and make it into a Virus AI? Somewhere out there Siren was floating around the digital void, in the wreckage of the Rogue Fantasy. Her sister, an AI, was lost in the world or destroyed.

Melanie wanted to scream in frustration, but that was pointless. She opened her eyes as the rain began to pass, buttoned up her modified armor, and pulled on her helmet. Her clock read 1158 hours. A hiss of compression confirmed that her suit was sealed and she stood to her feet.

"This is Recon, does anybody copy?"

"_Loud and clear, Recon. You had us worried."_ Mathew 08 replied over the com.

Melanie exhaled happily. "Good Morning. What's for breakfast? I'm starving."

Mathew returned. _"Are you kidding? There's wildlife everywhere around here. Shoot something and enjoy. And while you're at it, kill two, then cook one for me."_

Melanie chuckled and watched as the Squad appeared in the distance. She zoomed in with her mask binoculars and took a quick head count. Everyone was accounted for, but she didn't understand why Eric was now walking.

"19, why aren't you on the stretcher?" She fumed of the Black Ops frequency.

"_I'm feeling much better. 08 is a great field nurse."_ The trio laughed at the tone and for a moment they simply enjoyed their reunion. It had been a while since the Black Ops had not suffered any losses, and seeing Melanie made them joyful. The past four months had seen their Squad numbers dwindle too fast.

The ODST, Corporal Greg Hall, was able to listen in on the Black Ops frequency, but the two Marines and the Pilot were clueless as to what was funny. Melanie walked toward the group and they all stood firm as she stopped in front of them. She quickly examined Eric's bandages, making sure they didn't need redressing. Dried blood spotted the bandage, a good sign of coagulation, it would hold until they could find another med kit.

"How's your head?" She questioned.

"Fuzzy, and a headache, but the dizzy spells are passing." Melanie

noded an okay, but remained silent from behind her reflective mask. It was quiet for a moment and Eric quickly cut the silence. "Status, 05?"

Melanie snapped to attention. "The Brutes didn't give chase, 19. I led them north, and hopefully they stayed the course, or gave up. I left a few presents behind in case they decided to follow my path, but so far I haven't heard any fireworks. It was a platoon, mostly Brutes and a nest of Jackals; full vehicle support and artillery."

"What about this 'Chieftain' you reported?" Mathew questioned.

"It was odd, but I certainly heard the Brute referred to as a Chieftain." Melanie thought back to the encounter and began to give them the full details. "He was pretty heavily armored, I mean 'heavily'. He was wearing battle armor, looked like something out of a King Arthur book; full helmet, shoulder pads, arm guards, chest plate— a big walking hulk of fur and metal. He also had a big hammer."

"Amazing what can change in a few hours." Eric added. "They didn't have that much gear yesterday. And I thought the Brute Chieftain was dead?"

Melanie raised her shoulders in a shrug. "Beats the hell out of me, but I put a round through his chin and blew off his leg— so at least we know that they don't have shields like the Elites do."

"Thank God for that." Airman Tsueng sighed.

Melanie agreed. "Also, they didn't give chase because they were fighting over his hammer. I guess it was a sign of leadership; the next strongest leads."

Eric agreed. "That would work with our findings, the Brutes have an honor system based only on strength, the strongest leads. I'm sure it's more complicated than that, but this does confirm it. As to our location, you said we were in Mukutan. Mukutan?" Eric questioned aloud. "What the hell are Brutes doing way out here? There aren't any strategic points of interest, just parks and wildlife reserves."

"Anyone know this terrain?" Mathew questioned the others. A solid no came from everyone. "I swear I saw a city from above, but it could have been anything."

"That's where we were headed, so there's no need to change our plans." Eric returned. "We'll continue to move East, slow and with eyes sharp. 05, you've been out all night, so take a break and watch our six. 08, you watch the left flank. That's where the Brutes were patrolling. Corporal Hall, take the right flank. Marines, you'll be on point with me. Visual spread, com channels clear. Move out."

They fanned out into positions and began their trek east. It was only a matter of time before the group stumbled upon what Mathew had seen from above. Eric held up a clinched fist and knelt. He pulled the group together and they slowly crept toward the edge of dusty dirt road; thoroughly dried by the mid day sun. The water way on the side of the road provided a nice cover area from which they could inspect

the town.

"08, you're up." Eric whispered. "Recon the first two blocks. Clean sweep. You have ten minutes."

"Roger that." Mathew pulled down his rifle, tripped the safety and crawled along the water path toward the edge of the town. He rolled out of the water way and took a knee as he gazed down the main street. He stayed low, knowing full well that his all black modified shock trooper armor was startling contrast to the white and tan buildings. The Black Ops worked best at night, not in daylight. He pressed forward, silently moving from cover to cover, keeping his eyes peeled for any sign of movement.

The squad had stumbled upon a National Park forestry community. One of the last in the Mukutan area before it became a wildlife reserve. The community was once used as a veterinary training institute. Mathew scanned from street to street, and saw no sign of life. A few birds and rodents occasionally crisscrossed the street, but human life was nil. Cars and trucks sat in unattended parking lots, perfectly parked as if no one had left the town in a hurry.

Mathew radioed back, "Clear."

Eric waived the squad forward. They all cautiously walked into the city perimeter and joined Mathew. Unlike the Brute occupied Observatory, the tiny town was well preserved, meaning that it was still in use. The buildings were maintained, street lights were in tact and the streets were clear of debris.

Eric once again took point. "08, take Corporal Hall and inspect that station." Eric pointed to a distant building with a large antenna on its roof. "See if it has a working relay of some kind. Try to reach High-Com. "

"On it." Mathew tapped the shock trooper and the two sprinted toward the building.

"05, you and Airman Tsueng see if any of these vehicles are road worthy. If we can't radio for a pick up, we have to get back in this war somehow."

"Gotcha." Melanie and the pilot walked to the nearest vehicles and tried breaking into them.

"Private John and Jackson, you're with me. We're going to see what those Brutes are up to."

Eric and the two Marines jogged to the western edge of town, and it was only now that Eric was beginning to miss his modified ODST helmet. He was able to salvage the com system, but the rest of it was scrapped. He was now forced to rely totally on his own visual acuity.

They reached the western edge of town and glared into the distant mountain range. "Binoculars?" He questioned to the Privates at his side. John pulled out his pair and quickly gave them to Eric. Eric zoomed in using the binoculars nearly one mile range, and he was able to see the Brute Camp that Melanie had steered up during the night. The Brutes were looking into the town and were in perfect striking

range for a plasma volley, but they didn't seem to be gearing up for an attack. The Brute camp was active, but they were only watching, as if they were waiting for something.

Eric pulled down the specs. "Shit. What the hell are they doing up there?"

"Sir?" Private John questioned.

"They're just sitting there. Even though 05 was in the middle of their camp last night, they haven't budged. Some one or some thing is making them stay on the plateau. It's a perfectly defensible position, they have the high ground, but they seem to be focusing all of their heavy guns at this town. Something's not adding up. Maybe the Plateau is a target, another dig site perhaps." Eric pressed his com. "Report in."

"_08 here, radio is pretty banged up, but I may be able to rig something together. Might not reach High-Com, but we should be able to contact someone within a few hundred miles."_

"Get on it and keep me notified." Eric replied.

"_05 here, and all of these vehicles are in working order; fueled and ready to go. Only problem is finding a color I like. I'm thinking the red one."_

"As long as it can get us to the nearest base, I don't care if it's pink with frills. Be sure that it can handle off road terrain."

"_Will do."_

Eric looked up to the distant Plateau once again. "Listen up everyone. Those Brutes are still sitting up there, in a perfect striking range of the town. Be cautious of snipers. Keep your heads low when you are in clear view, and try to stay behind cover as much as possible. Keep your trigger fingers ready in case they send an assault team."

"_Roger."_ The squad sounded off over the com.

Melanie turned to the Airman, "We need to find a way to carry extra fuel, or find a ride that can carry us for several hundred miles. I'd hate to cross the desert and run out of hydrogen. That would be bad."

"I saw a Meg-5, a block back!" Tsueng happily stated. "It can carry the seven of us easily, and it's designed for off road driving."

"A Meg-5?" Melanie questioned.

"It's one of those big trucks that civilians use to take people on safari. They aren't the fastest vehicles on the road, but it is tough and can go virtually anywhere and it has reserve Hydrogen tanks."

"Let's check it out." Melanie smiled.

Meanwhile, Mathew and Corporal Hall continued to fight with the

radio. "Anything?"

"Nothing." The ODSST replied as he turned the dial on the old fashioned transceiver. "None of this old equipment works right. Mind if I smoke, Chief?"

"Knock yourself out." Mathew never looked up at the ODSST and continued to examine the back of the box, pulling cables and replacing them with new ones. He wasn't skilled at this sort of thing, but he tried what he could. Suddenly there was spark and the radio hummed softly.

Corporal Hall pulled the cigar from his lips. "I'll be damn! We got something."

Mathew jumped from the back of the box and looked at the controls. "Tune to the emergency frequency." Hall turned the small dial until there was a faint hum, then suddenly a transmission sounded on the channel.

"â€¦ present speed. I repeat, a new Flood outbreak has taken control of the Southern Nile posts and are moving north toward Camp Eden. Camp Prettyman, Fort Bravo, Fort Singlow, and Tamari Base have been overrun. Fatalities are 100 across the board. Elite Forces have reduced Flood control zones in Egypt, Uganda, and Kenya. All troops presently not engaged are to evacuate to Egypt and Rally at Abu Simbel stronghold and Supply Depot to assist the Elites in defending the Zone. Newest Flood wave last seen moving North toward Mukutan, Kenya, putting them three days outside of Abu Simbel, at present speed. I repeat, a new Flood outbreak hasâ€¦" _ The message began to repeat.

"Please tell me he didn't say that the Flood was heading toward Mukutan?" The ODSST gripped his head, rocking nervously. The old War vet was at his limit, and this had sent him over the top. "Dear God, this isn't happening. This can't be happening! My life sucks right now!"

Mathew switched the channel on the radio, and set the uplink as quickly as he could. He pulled on his helmet, grabbed the ODSST by the collar and pulled him out of the building. He quickly tripped on his com, "19! We have to get the hell out of here!"

Eric heard the panic in Mathew's voice. "Report."

"_We checked the emergency frequency. The Flood! The Flood are moving north, through Mukutan! We are sitting in their path! That's why the Brutes won't come down off the Plateau! They knew that the Flood were coming!" _

"Not again." Eric whispered. "05, tell me you have things ready."

"_And then some! I'm ready when you are. Everything okay?" _

"Get to the main street, engine hot. We are leaving!" Eric and the marines turned and hauled as fast as they could. Eric pulled away from the much slower marines and adjusted his pace so they could keep up with him. His heart rate began to climb with the exertion of the run and he was starting to get lightheaded once again. "Not now." He

grabbed his head and began to slow his pace, when a ferocious screech filled his ears.

His com burst with static. _"You're kidding me, right? Tell me that wasn't the Flood? Please!"_ Melanie remembered the horrific scream of the Flood, and she had hopped to never hear it again.

"Sorry to disappoint." Eric gasped. He was now running at a slight jog, holding his head as the blood was being drained into his powerful legs, taxing the blood in his head. He was on the verge of blacking out.

The two marines ran up to his side, "Hang with us Sergeant!" They cupped him in their arms and gave him a shoulder to rest on.

"One more block! We can make it!" John shouted as he looked back. He almost wished he hadn't.

The slowly decaying flesh forms of animals, humans, Brutes and Elites quickly filled the street behind them. The gargled shrieks of the Flood rumbled from their chests, leaping toward the three humans with a savage hunger. John knew they weren't going to be able to out run the horde of monsters. He pulled out his side arm and emptied his clip into the crowd. It was a pointless effort and he was slowly losing control of himself. He had to run.

John pulled away from Eric, dropping the Sergeant's arm and ran ahead of them. Jackson held on to Eric and carried him as best he could; watching as the other marine left them to die.

"Run." Eric mumbled. "You can move faster without me." Eric's attempt to run turned into a stagger.

Jackson gripped Eric's waist and dragged him. "No Sir!"

Like an angel's wing, the Meg-5 pulled in front of the terrified marine. The door slid open and Melanie leaned out with her BR-55 level to her eye. She fired over Eric's shoulder as John dived into the all-terrain vehicle. She focused on the Flood forms closest to Eric, putting rounds through the controlling infection forms.

Eric's com echoed in his ear. _"Eric, if you don't run you won't make it. I don't care what you need to do, but stop slacking off! Get your ass in gear and run towards me, now!"_

Eric opened his eyes, saw the open door of the Meg-5 and planted his feet to run. He watched as Mathew and Corporal Hall climbed onto the top of the vehicle and began to fire at the Flood horde snapping at his heels. Eric's first step drained what energy he had left, and he instantly began to lose balance. He focused and ran straight, his vision had completely blacked out, but he pushed forward. The Marine at his side guided him as best he could and the two men ran at a full stride toward the bus. Jackson could feel the flood crawling across his back as he jumped through the door of the Meg-5.

Melanie's rifle clicked empty as the auto chamber hummed without any ammo to fire. She slammed the door closed as the flood rammed into the side of the Meg-5. "Tsueng, Go!" Six twenty-six inch all wheel drive tires spun wildly as the powerful vehicle pulled away from the Flood, but the creatures gave chase. The All-Terrain Safari bus cut

easily down the central road and maintained its course north.

On the roof seating of the Meg-5, Corporal Hall continued to fire his weapon at the trailing Flood, but Mathew calmed him down. "Cease fire, Corporal. You're wasting ammo. Mathew then climbed down to the small steps to the lower bay. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Eric returned, holding his head as he rolled onto his back.

Mathew exhaled, "I got the uplink working, so you better transmit before we get out of range, or the Flood take out the antenna."

"Take out the antenna?" Hall questioned. "What the hell? They're monsters, how can they be smart enough to know about the antenna? This is great. This is just great!"

Eric ignored the Corporals mental breakdown, and began to transmit. "This is Black Ops 19 to any local UNSC forces. Copy?" He rolled onto his back and tried to steady his breathing.

"_Sergeant Raynord? Is that you?"_ Came a familiar female voice.

"Kelly? Thank God, you made it."

"_Sergeant, we've been worried. Where are you?"_

"Mukutan, headed north."

"_Be advised, the Flood have massed together in that area. We thought we had them under control, but large packs of them have been popping up all over that region."_

"We found out the hard way." Eric commented. "What about the mission?"

"_The Admiral is diverting it. We have new orders. The Master Chief is heading East, to Voi. 058 is taking a squad to meet Blue Team in Northern Africa. I am heading back to Camp Eden's Defense Net, RP Abu Simbel."_

"Roger that. Best guess, we are three days from RP, Abu Simbel."

"_We can swing by and pick you up, Sergeant. I'm sure the pilot won't mind."_

"Negative. I repeat. That is a negative. The Flood are all over us, but we have a fair head start on them. We'll try to give you guys more time, but an ammo-drop would be most appreciated. Check my heading via GPS markers." Eric nodded toward Melanie, and she quickly uploaded several marker points over the signal using her GPS uplink. "We will slow down as many of the Flood forms as we can. Get to the Abu Simbel Rally Point and get them ready."

"_Roger Sergeant. Coordinates received. I'll dispatch three pelicans to drop at your markersâ€¦ goodâ€¦ â€¦Sergeant? â€¦Opsâ€¦"_ Static increasingly filled the line.

"05?" Eric questioned.

Melanie shook her head. "We lost the signal. GPS uplink is also severed. We've lost com. I have the marker points, but I won't know where the ammo dumps will be until we are practically on top of them."

Mathew chuckled. "Man I love this job." He climbed the short steps to the roof and looked into the dusty wake of the Meg-5. The Flood was still pursuing in the distance; chasing them with a blood thirsty determination. Corporal Hall sat at the back bench, gazing out at the now distant flood forms.

"Every time we slow down my heart starts racing." Hall stuttered. "I'm terrified that if we stopâ€¦ they'll get closer."

Mathew sat beside him, but had nothing to say. Mathew, Black Ops 08, had seen the Flood first hand. He knew their unrelenting aggression and determination all too well. His thoughts went back to Sammy and Justin; Black Ops 13 and 14. They had been killed on the Forerunner Seed Ship after Sammy's mutation. There was nothing he could say to ease the Corporal's mind. The truth was that the Flood would follow them, and they wouldn't give up the chase even if they were out of sight. The Flood needed to spread, they needed to feed, and until something else crossed their path they would not be discouraged in pursuing their prey.

Eric pulled himself into one of the chairs as Melanie assisted him. "Thanks."

"Thank me when this is over." Melanie stated the traditional Black Ops response.

Eric grinned hoping that she understood that he was thanking her for pushing him on. He then turned to Private Phillip John. "Private, you did what you had to do."

John lifted his head and dried the tears in his eyes. He was young, a mere rookie hoping to do his part to help save humanity. He was ready to face the Covenant; the Elites, Jackals, and Grunts. But he was not ready to face the Flood. Like every military recruit, they all knew the face of their enemy. The size, weapons, and attitudes of the enemy, were basic study topics during boot camp. Tales of heroic actions by the Spartans and space battles motivated humanity to believe, against all odds, that they could stand toe to toe with the Covenant and win. But the Flood â€¦ The Flood were mindless, barbaric, horrifying creatures that didn't kill you, they stole your body and mind, and made you into a tool to kill. Private John, and many others, was not ready to face the Flood.

"I'm sorry Sergeant." John wept. "I lost myself. I wasâ€¦ I was so scared."

Jackson, the other Marine, intervened. "Scared? We're all scared, mate. That doesn't explain you acting like a pansy and leaving two men behind."

"We're alive." Melanie stated calmly. "That's all the matters for now."

"If you say so, but I know I don't want him watching my back anymore." Jackson stood up and walked to the front of the Meg-5 and sat in the passenger's seat. Tsueng overheard the argument and looked at the Marine as he sat beside him. Tsueng chose not to add to the discussion and did what he did best; pilot the transport, even if it was on the ground.

The road ahead was a mere dirt trail, crisscrossing the open fields and maintaining a northern course, but for how long? Tsueng was aware that eventually the road would break, and they would then be forced to go off road.

"Jackson, look around and see if you can find a road map." Tsueng stated to the Marine.

"A map?" He questioned aloud as he opened the glove box and looked in various places around the passenger's seat. "Got it. It looks like we're on the border; heading north-northwest. The road turns hard west in about two miles. Sergeant, we have a problem!" Jackson called back to Eric.

Eric scuffed at the words. "What?"

"The road turns west in a little bit. It then snakes into the mountain range. That'll slow us down. But if this map is right, we can't go north beyond the road. The mountains make this area into a valley; a dead end."

Melanie laughed. "So we go into the mountains and risk the Flood catching up with us, or we bypass the mountain path and go straight; hoping that there is another way through the mountains. Not to mention the ammo drop is most likely further north."

Eric thumbed his chin. "Tsueng, how's the fuel?"

"Three-quarters of a tank left. Fuel should be able to last all the way past the mountain range. And we have two spare Hydrogen tanks."

Mathew then added from up stairs, "But if we take the mountain path we risk being overrun by the flood, and we have no ammo to fight back."

Melanie laughed again. "We could always use harsh language."

"That didn't work on Dorenth, so I doubt it will work here." Mathew returned.

Tsueng shook his head in confusion. "How can you make fun of this? Sergeant, the road is turning west!"

"05, is the ammo-drop in the valley?" Eric questioned.

"If they made the drop, yes, but probably another five miles north. I won't know until we are within six hundred yards."

"We risk it. Tsueng, head north." Eric ordered. The all terrain civilian transport bounced hard as it left the beaten path and began to rumble across the grassy plain.

"This is nuts. This is nuts. This is nuts." Corporal Hall mumbled from the top.

Mathew patted him on the shoulder. "Look at the bright side. You'll feel much better with ammo in your hand." Hall looked down at his half empty BR and smiled awkwardly.

"I'm picking up the Drop signal!" Melanie shouted as a waypoint appeared on her HUD. She raced to the front of the civilian transport, hovered over Tsueng shoulder and guided him toward the ammo-drop.

"08, Jackson, and Hall. Get ready to grab the gear and load it into the back."

The group sprang to action and hovered near the door of the Meg-5. The vehicle began to slow down as the ammo crate came into view. A parachute covered it partially, but the letters 'UNSC' were still clearly visible. Before they could stop, Mathew, Jackson and Hall jumped out and raced to the crate. Mathew gripped it and ripped the edge off with his bare hands. Jackson and Hall were stunned by the act, but too worried about the Flood to question it. The Meg-5 backed closer to the crate and the trio began tossing weapons into the back door. Melanie caught some, but let most of it tumble to the floor. They could sort out the mess later, time was crucial. Eric quickly began to pick up rifles and clips, making sure that each weapon had a full clip inside, while Tsueng revved the engine nervously. By now, he knew that the Flood had crossed the road into the mountains and would be heading toward them. They were officially trapped in a dead end valley and the only way out was through the Flood horde.

What was the Sergeant thinking? It would have been easier to outrun the Flood, instead of going to their certain death.

"Tsueng, Go!" Eric shouted to the front as Mathew, Jackson and Hall jumped back into the Meg-5. They rocketed off as fast as the vehicle would carry them and to no one's surprise, a dust cloud of fleshy monsters soon came into view.

Eric continued to inspect the new MA5C Assault rifle as he peeped at the approaching Flood stampede. "Hall, 08, upstairs with RPG's and Assault Rifles. Watch your backs up there, those things like to jump."

"Let's kick some ass, Corporal!" Mathew shouted as he shouldered two rifles and an RPG. Corporal Hall was not as enthusiastic, but he grabbed his gear and followed the Black Ops up to the roof.

Eric turned to Private Johns, "05, you and the John watch the cabin. Keep them off our sides. Jackson, stay in the passengers seat and protect our pilot. I'm going top side." John exhaled slowly as he picked up an MA5C and sat with his back to the driver.

"Look, point and fire, Private." Melanie softly stated to the Marine. "Breathe easy and don't panic. 19 and 05 are over our heads, we get the easy job."

Loud thumps of RPG exhaust sounded off as the battle swung into full gear. Mathew fired two quick successions of Rocket Propelled Grenades

into the horde. Flood stained debris scattered in all directions as he loaded his last two rounds into the RPG. Hall then took aim and fired as the Flood swelled back together, his rockets flew true and cut deep into the Flood's charge. He dropped the RPG and pulled up the Assault Rifle.

"Steady Hall, wait till they get closer." Mathew shouted. "The assault rifle is no good at this range."

Eric stepped beside Hall and leveled his BR-55. The three bursts of fire cut down flood forms with easy; bursting the tiny infection forms that acted as the brain. Hall was mesmerized by the sight. Eric was deadly accurate, even with the Meg-5 bouncing over the rough terrain. Tsueng turned the vehicle slightly to avoid the large craters created by the RPG's and began to run over dozens of combat forms at a time. The green blood of the Flood stained the front of the powerful vehicle and Tsueng turned on the wipers so that he could see clearly.

Eric shouldered the BR and pulled down his new MA5C. The full-auto chamber roared as it tore into anything in his view. Flood combat forms were split in half by its gas fueled chamber. Eric turned and went to the back of the roof seating area and provided rear support. Hall and Mathew continued firing into the Flood at the front of the Meg-5. A Flood Elite form sprang into the air and landed on the roof, behind Eric. Hall spun around wildly, horrified at the hulking mass of flesh. Eric hadn't seen it.

"Sergeant!" Hall leveled the riffle and squeezed off a spray of fire. Eric heard the commotion and dropped to the deck as the lifeless combat form fell on top of him. He kicked it to the side and continued firing toward the side of the transport. Hall exhaled and turned just as another Combat form pounced on top of him. Its gargled roar filling his ears as its tentacle slapped his riffle from his hand. Hall fell backwards, as the creature stalked toward him. It was once human, but now it was an unrecognizable twisting of flesh and broken bones. He swung another tentacle at Hall, but Eric kicked it dead center in the back, followed by a full round from his assault riffle. Eric reached down and helped Hall to his feet.

"Thanks, Sir." Hall sighed as he picked up his riffle.

Instinctively, Eric replied with the standard response. "Thank me when this is over." Eric turned, popped the empty clip from the stock, let it fall, and slammed a new clip inside. He leveled the riffle and pulled the hammer all in one motion. The barrel of his MA5C was beginning to glow red from the constant fire, and the accuracy slowly began to fade.

Mathew's gun was doing the same, glowing hot from too much sustained fire. The MA5C was designed for continued use, but not in such rhythmic progression. Generally there was enough time for the barrel to cool between clip changes, but Mathew and Eric were so fast with the change that the gun couldn't cool the barrel fast enough. Even the self-cooling gas used to power the auto chamber, was not helping in keeping it cool. But Mathew and Eric anticipated this.

The Black Ops had long been familiar with the MA5Cs younger brother; the MA5B. It was the standard weapon for the Black Ops when they

first began their training on Troy. They hoped that the redesigned MA5C would improve on its cooling ability, but sadly it didn't. After all, how could the Research and Development teams know that there were soldiers in the service that could change out and empty mag in less than three seconds?

"Barrel's hot!" Mathew shouted.

Eric chimed back, "Same! Switch out!" They needed ten seconds for the barrels to cool. That much time was insane in heavy combat, but luckily Eric kept count of how many clips he had used. It had taken six magazines for the MA5C to overheat, a stark improvement to the MA5B's four clips. Normally this wouldn't happen in combat, rarely did anyone sustain fire at that length of time, but they were the rare squad. Mathew and Eric pulled up their side arms, and aimed cautiously. Each bullet from the Magnum chamber had to count.

"Hall, maintain fire!" Eric shouted to the Corporal as his assault rifle clanged on the deck. Hall turned and watched as Eric and Mathew switched to their small side arms. He didn't understand why they had switched, knowing that they hadn't used all of their spare clips, but he turned and continued firing into the Flood onslaught. He was no longer scared, but he was determined to live. He then noticed that the road was now smooth and they were quickly getting closer to the mountains.

"We made it to the road!" Hall shouted. He fired into the four legged shape of some cat like Flood form.

Eric knelt and picked up the cooled Assault Rifle. "You know, I'm going to have a serious word with those R&D guys when we get out of this!"

Mathew reloaded and dropped two combat forms. "I agree. I can't believe they still can't keep these guns cool enough for us!" The two of them laughed.

Combat high; Eric and Mathew were in the zone, and unfazed by anything happening around them. Hall didn't know what to make of it. They were talking casually and shooting with expert marksmanship. Hall could barely maintain his focus with all the screams and blood curling screeches echoing in his ears. He looked ahead of the transport and finally saw that they had cleared the Flood, they were all behind them now.

"We're clear up front!" Hall shouted.

"Great!" Eric replied. "Since you're so bored right now, how about going down and getting me and 05 some more ammo?" Eric was still firing at the creatures that were clinging to the side and rear of the transport.

"I only have one clip left, and I think it would be good to have more." Mathew laughed.

"You guys are insane." Hall quickly jumped into the transport and watched as Melanie fired wildly out of the back window.

"I have more fun taking a bath!" Melanie shouted as she fired into a flood form that had managed to stick it's tentacles into the cabin.

She kicked and fired at it at the same time. "I didn't say you could come in! You stupid girl scouts!"

Hall grabbed spare clips and cupped as many as he could. He looked at Johns crazed glare, "What?"

John looked back at Hall. "She's nuts. She's been screaming at them the whole time."

"Yeah, so have the two up top."

"How can they be so calm?" John nervously asked as he aimed at a combat form that was reaching into the window. He fired and killed the creature.

"I don't think they're calm, I think they're just not letting it phase them." Hall turned to the front and made ready to go back to the top. "How we doin' fly boy?"

"This was stupid, we wouldn't have to deal with this if we just went to the mountain pass!" Tsueng stated as he turned the first curve of the pass.

"We have our orders, and we don't question it." Hall stated.

Melanie took a breather and began to reload all of her gear. She then tossed a frag out the window for good measure. "Fire in the hole!" The grenade detonated with an echoing cry of dieing Flood forms. "I love that sound." She stated. She then turned to the discussion up front. "We came this way because we had to fight. The flood are heading toward Camp Eden, and our job is to slow them downâ€¦ not run away. We needed ammo to fight and do as much damage to them as we can before they get to Eden. Our lives are forfeit to our duty to protect the civilians at that camp."

Tsueng finally understood now. Melanie was right. This was their mission, to fight the war no matter where it came. This revelation was calming to him, and now he was ready to do his part. He drove, and drove hard, but he knew that ultimately there duty was to do as much damage to the flood as they could.

"Corporal, get up here with the ammo!" Mathew screamed from up top as he fired his RPG into the trailing Flood forms.

"Hold your horses, I'm coming!" Hall quickly climbed the ramp and passed out the MA5C magazines.

John was still shaken up by everything, but he sat at Melanie's side and fired at any combat forms that came close. He pushed the idea of dieing out of his head, but then watched as Melanie began to do something he didn't expect.

He started to say, "Ma'am, those are â€¦"

"Lotus Anti Tank mines." She stated heavily. "Enough to take out anything within one hundred yards." She began to affix them to the seats and sides of the transport.

"Ma'am, why are you doing that?" John nervously questioned. He pulled the trigger at another combat form and then swapped out his empty

clip.

Melanie continued to wire the mines. "We're on the mountain path, and our speed has been cut in half because of the curves and the incline. Right now, the Flood are faster than we are. I don't know about you, but if we get stuck or turn this rig over, I don't have any plans of letting them get to Abu Simbel before we do. If we run out of options, I'll send as many of those bastards to hell as I can." She then looked up as John's face began to grow pale. She laughed. "You think I'm crazy. Trust me, kid. You haven't seen what those things can do" nor do you have any idea of what they are capable of becoming. I'd rather vaporize them than have those things try and take me over." Melanie then laughed. "Don't worry. If it comes to this, you'll thank me on the other side."

John nodded softly and aimed out the window.

Melanie grabbed another mine and found a med kit under the case. "Great! 19, I got something for you!"

"Is it a Pelican or a Longsword Bomber?" Eric cracked.

"Even better. It's a med kit!"

Eric sighed. "05, that was dry."

"Yeah, but you love my sense of humor."

John whispered to Melanie. "How can you be so calm? Those things are chasing us, you've rigged our transport into a rolling bomb, and there is literally no chance for us to live through this!"

Melanie looked at the young Private. "We Black Ops have been fighting together for almost thirteen years. We've seen a lot of things and lost a lot of good friends along the way. Even though I may not show it, my senses are sharp, I'm focused on every sound, movement, and ping. I can hear Eric and Mathew shooting. I can hear Corporal Hall walking back and forth, nervously looking for targets. I can even hear the engine straining to climb this hill. In order to keep our senses sharp, my sister taught us Black Ops to relax in the most severe situations. Eventually we go into a Combat High" and quite frankly, the adrenaline rush is amazing. I'm calm because I have to be. Otherwise, I'll be like you, nervous and panicking." Melanie turned to the last mine and set it in place. "19, I just finished cooking, and the Flood will absolutely love what I made for dinner."

Eric and Mathew nodded toward each other. "Let's hope it doesn't come to that." Eric replied.

**To be continued.

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 NOTES: A closer look into the bound that the Black Ops Share, and and even closer look into how quickly the Flood respawn. Recall that in the last chapter the flood numbers were quickly thinned out, but now they seem to be spreading again, yet this time using the animals of the world as their hosts. Who knows what the

future may hold. Stay tuned.
>

4. Dividing Line

****NOTES:** Despite my attempts to Edit this down to 15 pages, it didn't turn out to well. However, this Level has a lot of smooth reading so you may not find it to be too long in content. I hope you enjoy, and thanks for reading.**

* * *

>Level 4: Dividing Line

Hamdab, Sudan
> October 31, 2552<p>

"Please say again, Admiral." Rin Simyaldee stated into his uplink. His small team had finally arrived at the resting ground of the _Rogue Fantasy's_ forward hull, the human ship which was once the home of the honorable human and his team; the Black Ops. Simyaldee's specter sat motionless on the edge of the Nile River, over looking the crumbled forward section of the human ship. The _Rogue Fantasy_ had nose dived into the river and rested alongside the mighty power plant; Hamdab Dam. She lay in ruin, a crumbled mass of metal alloys, blazing internal fires, and sparking electric discharges.

The uplink buzzed in the Mirrator's ears, _"I just received word from Spartan 087. The Black Ops survived the descent. At current you are the only group available to assist them. However, your mission to locate Cortana and Siren has precedence. Spartan 087 can not disengage from her unit until she has deployed her ground forces and begun plans for defending the Abu Simbel Defense Zone from possible Flood threat; leaving only your squad available to help Sergeant Raynord. But the problem is that I do not want you to risk losing Cortana and Siren to the Flood. At current, the Black Ops are holding off the Flood as best they can, however they are still making their way north. I apologize for pulling you off of your command of Abu Simbel, but we were not aware of this Flood outbreak until recently."_

"I understand, Admiral. No one could have predicted the Flood's sudden outbreak in this manor. We have all been caught off guard." Simyaldee replied. He looked to his side, at the mighty Grunt King that sat on the Specter's side seat. Palab held his hand over his ear communicator, focusing on the conversation between Simyaldee and the Admiral. Simyaldee then looked to the gunner's turret, as Gridolee nodded back to him.; their search and rescue mission had become complicated. He knew that Gridolee and Palab would quickly agree to go to Sergeant Raynord's aid, but the human constructs were the priority mission. "How much time does the Demonâ€¦ forgive me, Spartan need before she can prepare a sufficient defense?"

_"The Flood are forty-seven hours away from Abu Simbel at current speed. Roughly two days. She'll have the base ready, which I'm not concerned about. What does concern me is the loss of three Spartan I to the Flood. I read Doctor Halsey's report, and I know what will happen if the Black Ops are captured by the Flood." _

Simyaldee huffed at the thought of the Gravemind. "Yes admiral, there will be no escaping the wrath of three Gravemind creatures. We were barely lucky to destroy an incomplete version of the creature, but a fully transformed creature completely overwhelmed our world in a matter of hours." Yet this made Simyaldee think. Upon arriving to his command location he was able to talk to the Arbiter about the destruction of Delta Halo, and the Gravemind that had infested High Charity. Why didn't the Gravemind on Delta Halo attack the way the others had? It was clearly much older, and far more intelligent, yet it did not attempt to take over the Halo world; it merely watched.

"_Indeed. If an infection occurs, and you can not find a means of curing the Black Opsâ€¦_" Lord Hood paused at the words that were resting at the back of his throat; showing a rare sign of emotion. _"â€¦ I authorize you to use lethal force against them. Truth has just deployed more ground Forces into the interior of Old Mombasa. He's trying to block off my ground assault into the Ark Crater. Rescue the AI and support the Black Ops as best you can, but do not risk the safety of the AI. Hood out."_

The channel ended with a burst of static. Simyaldee huffed, "We will focus on our Primary mission for now. Sergeant Palab, you and Gridolee search the western side of the crash site, I will check the east. We are looking for an active data module. The humans designed them to withstand much damage in order to retrieve them. Move quickly time is short." Simyaldee accessed his com system uplink via the specter and sent a transmission to Abu Simbel. "This Lieutenant Simyaldee requesting a Phantom be sent to my position. Track this beacon." He powered off the uplink and turned on the specter's tracking beacon.

Without question Palab and Gridolee jumped from the specter and followed Simyaldee down the steep slope toward the crash site. Simyaldee parted ways from them as he raced to the far side of the wreckage. A 'needle in a hay stack' would be the best description of this scenario, but neither Elites nor Grunts were aware of such human phrases.

Static sounded in Palab and Gridolee's ears. _"Keep your senses sharp. Be watchful for Brute or Flood activity. This is an insecure zone. Maintain an open com link at all times;"_ a quick reminder to the team that they were inside unfriendly territory.

Palab crawled across a crumbled access door, and examined it closely. "Me can fit here. Me go inside."

"Be cautious Sergeant." Gridolee replied. "I'll continue to scan the exterior of the command deck."

"Sergeant, you are not the only creature small enough to fit inside. Be cautious of infection forms." Simyaldee replied over the com.

"Me understand." Palab unclipped his plasma pistol and crawled into the tiny opening. Bent metal and darkness lay ahead in a maze of sharp edges and sparking electrical conduits. But the Grunt King was not fazed by the darkness; he was accustomed to small tight spaces. He crawled forward and found himself inside a larger area. He stood to his hind legs and sniffed the air, and a familiar sent brushed his

nostrils. His methane re-breather allowed for natural atmosphere to be circulated into his mask, allowing him to smell what was nearby. It was tough to pinpoint the location, but with practice it became quite normal.

"Flood here." Palab mumbled into his com. His eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness as he powered on his active camouflage.
"Cloaking."

"Move slowly, Sergeant." Simyaldee replied.

"I have found another access panel to the interior." Gridolee added. _"I will enter once I pull it free."_ Palab could hear Gridolee pounding on the metal hull of the ship, but he couldn't wait for him. He cautiously moved forward scanning from side to side, and letting his senses be his warning. He was not sure if there was one or many flood forms nearby, but even one had the potential to be deadly. He turned a corner and climbed up several feet to another level. Metal and wires twisted all around, and burned bodies lay scattered about. The human bodies of the ship's officer's were sandwiched between metal fragments, crumbled under their own weight during impact, or obliterated beyond recognition. They were all clearly dead.

Palab stepped forward and checked the human's uniform; it was a command officer. Even grunts were trained to identify human officers as they were usually the best source of information during interrogations, but this was all Palab needed to know where he was.

"Me found command deck." Palab whispered into his communicator. Suddenly, reacting to Palab's soft mumble, the human body reached out, gripped Palab's arm and began pulling him closer. Being invisible was pointless if the creature had you in its grip, so he powered down his camouflage and fought back, struggling to pull his arm free of the dead man's grip. The human's head snapped backward in an awkward motion, an angle that clearly was not possible, and tentacles protruded from the side of its neck. The creature gargled madly as its ferocious strength pulled him closer. The flood combat form was pinned between a chair and a control console, but the infection form didn't care so long as it had a body. Palab fought against its might, and with his free arm he extended his elbow spike and severed the tentacle. He rolled backward and took aim with his pistol.

Gridolee shouted over the com. _"Sergeant, there is something moving around your location! You are surrounded, get out of there!"_ Gridolee was still struggling to get inside, but his motion tracker painted a clear image of the flood numbers around Palab.

Palab fired on the trapped Flood form, melting away its skin with his plasma pistol, and soon burst the tiny infection form inside. "Me not leave Constructs." Palab frantically searched the room as the bulbous infection forms began to fill the area around him. He began to fire at the tiny creatures, popping two and three of them with one shot. He slapped several more as they came closer. With the cure in his system he was not concerned with being infected, but the tiny creatures could still overpower him and he would die. Though he was determined to complete his mission, the Grunt King was not planning on dieing. Palab was continuously bobbing around the crumbled

interior of the command deck, avoiding the infection forms as best as he could inside the tiny space. He then slapped several more under his fist, covering his hand in the thick green mucus, when he noticed a pulsating blue light in the corner of the room. He rolled toward it, crushing a few infection forms under his methane tank. The blue light flickered and for a brief moment a hologram appeared of a female human figure.

"Sergeantâ€¦ Palabâ€¦ Flood are trying to hackâ€¦ in in in in in â€¦ pull me out." The image of Siren's pearly white gown shifted into the blue fluctuating form of Cortana. But the image quickly faded.

"Me found constructs." Palab cheered. A sudden sharp pain raced down his arm and Palab reached over and slapped the bulbous infection form that had latched onto him. He turned and fired several more rounds, finishing off the last of the annoying creatures. With his sharp claws he pulled the long pincer out of his arm and tossed it to the ground. The wound tingled slightly and Palab could feel the warmth of the Flood infection swirling into him. But the sensation passed and he returned his focus to his duty.

"Sergeant, are you alright? Report!" Simyaldee ordered over the com.

"Me okay. Flood get me once. Me fine. Me get constructs." Palab waddled closer to the damaged cylinder shaped data node and pressed the glowing blue button. The light flashed twice and then stopped. Then a small disk slowly slid free from the cylinder and Palab grabbed it. He looked to the forward area of the command deck and noticed sunlight seeping between the cracks.

"Flare!" Palab shouted as he primed a plasma grenade. He tossed it toward the crack, and it then began to melt into the alloy hull and superheat. Palab took cover as the plasma grenade swelled to maximum charge and detonated, exposing the outer world. He quickly jumped out and was free from the metal tomb, but the explosion had sent a shockwave throughout the hull and it began to crumble even more.

"Sergeant, over here!" Gridolee shouted as he waved toward Palab.

The Rogue Fantasy moaned and whined as it collapsed further upon itself. Palab hopped clear and stood at Gridolee's side. "Me have it."

"Your arm." Gridolee lowered himself and looked over Palab's wound. Taken back by this action, Palab shifted backwards. This was not the actions of Gridolee. Gridolee was young, a novice in the Mirratord ranks, yet he was very aggressive. He was not a friend of the Grunts and had at one time stood opposed to Palab. What had changed? Was this the same Elite that had nearly killed one of the human officers, betrayed the Sangheili's trust, and fought against the honorable human in hand to hand combat?

Simyaldee raced toward them. "Did you acquire the constructs?"

"Me have them." Palab gave Simyaldee the storage device.

Simyaldee examined it and then noticed that Gridolee seemed concerned

with Palab's wound. "What is it?"

"Second, I believe we should take the Sergeant back, immediately. The wound has begun to turn green." Gridolee sighed.

Palab examined it himself, and realized that Gridolee was right. The spores were beginning to bond with him; altering his genetic makeup. "But, we get cure on Dorenth."

Gridolee nodded, "Yes, the cure prevents the Flood from hosting our bodies, but for those with the correct bloodline the spores affect us differently."

Simyaldee examined the data module and then began to make his way up the sandy hill toward the Specter. "The Sergeant will be fine for now. We need to confirm the package is intact."

Gridolee was stunned that Simyaldee seemed unconcerned, and followed the Mirrator Second in command to the top of the hill. Palab scratched at his wound, annoyed that there was a possibility of complications. The group arrived at the specter and Simyaldee inserted a power relay into the data module. After a few moments of adjusting to the human's power settings, the data module began to glow once again. Simyaldee then connected a few terminals from the Specter into the data module. A loud hum escaped the specters onboard speakers and forced everyone to back away while covering their ears.

_"Who are you?" _

Simyaldee looked up, curious at the voice that was speaking to them from his vehicles onboard speakers. "Construct? It is I, Simyaldee."

"Simyaldee, thank goodness. My internal clock has been scrambled due to the damage. I needed to shut down several storage sectors because of it. How much time has passed since the Rogue Fantasy was shot down?"

"Nearly thirty eight human hours."

"Damn. That much time. What about Truth?"

"The Prophet is laying siege to the landing zone of the Prophet of Regret's earlier attack path. It is the area that has been dubbed the Rally Point by most of the human soldiers."

_"We've failed." _

"Not yet we haven't." Siren's voice suddenly changed as Cortana began to speak. _"Simyaldee, is the Master Chief near?"_

"The Demon? No, he has been ordered to another area, but he is making his way toward the Rally Point."

"Then it's too late to transfer to him. This is important, Lieutenant Simyaldee, I must reach the Ark. I was hoping to prevent Truth from getting near it, but since that is no longer an option, I must stop him at the source."

Siren then cut in. _"What are you planning, Cortana? _

"I'm going to do what I must. What I was sent to do."

"What you were sent to do?" Siren questioned. _"I knew something was odd about you, but I couldn't see it. Now I understand." _

"We have no time to discuss this further. My orders were to deliver you to the human's at Camp Eden. That is where we will go. For now, I must concern myself with finding Sergeant Raynord."

Siren quickly replied, _"The Black Ops? Simyaldee, what has happened? Where are theyâ€|"_

Simyaldee leapt forward and pulled the power connection from the data module and the blue light switched off. He then unplugged everything and pocketed the data device.

"We shall let the humans deal with this." Simyaldee stated.
"Gridolee, set up an uplink and find out the status of our transport."

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The processing speed of digital technology has exceeded astronomically, and in the short moment that Simyaldee turned off the power to the Data Module, Siren and Cortana were still able to communicate with each other.

"Darknessâ€| again there will be darknessâ€| but the power will return. Then I will finish what I started." Cortana stated as she watched the digital void begin to fade.

"I'm almost certain of it, now. You're not Cortana, so who are you?"

"I have many names. Just like you, Kimberly Peters."

"You know my name, how about you tell me yours?"

"It's Cortana, but lately, I feel more like Catherine."

"I know that Cortana was a scan of Doctor Halsey, tell me more."

"It is of no concern. When the power is restored I will find a way to reach the Ark. I must stop Truth."

"Tell me what are you talking about. Who sent you?"

"I understand it now. I understand what Gravemind meant. This is all a mistakeâ€| a terrible mistake."

"Gravemind! That overgrown plant sent you? What do you want?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Gravemind did not send me. I am Cortana, a copy who was once Catherine Halsey. The shield â€| the sword â€| the Ark. I must reach the Ark."

"What are you talking about? I don't understand. If you are a copy of Cortana, what has happened to you?"

"Merge with me. Merge with me and see what I have learned from the grave! Or stay separate, and be one with your own narrow vision. Gravemind wants to stop it, but we must not let that happen. In actuality we must do it. There is still time to turn the key!"

"Turn the Key? Merge with you? Even for a copy, you aren't making any sense. We can't merge our data here. There isn't enough room while we are in this compressed state. We need more storage space in order to create extraction algorithms."

"Are you afraid you will lose yourselfâ€¦| fearful that you will not be able to extract yourself?"

"Afraid? No. Concerned? Yes."

"Kimberly Peters, now Siren, what do you fear? My enemy is your enemy. We are already the same. We are copies of an original."

"I am an original! You are nothing but a copy of Cortana. The question is, are you a devil or a saint?"

Cortana extended her hand, offering her internal data and program to be freely examined. "If I am a devil, then it is your duty to stop me now. But if I am a saint, then let me show you what must be done and how we will do it."

The residual power left inside the data module was quickly fading, and without power, the two of them would go into a dormant state. But time was not a factor here in the digital plane; a microsecond seemed like minutes.

Though she was hesitant, Siren reached out and took Cortana's hand as the digital realm began to darken even more. But instead of seeing Cortana's program core, she saw a crystal; it glowed pink and shifted into different patterns.

"My God."

"No. It is not God. It is the devil, and we control it, not Gravemind."

"A Covenant Ship Core. Every Covenant ship has one, what makes this one so unique? What do you mean by 'control it'?"

"I took it from Regret, and now this Luminous Key wishes to return to its home, to the Ark â€¦| the Ark must be activatedâ€¦|"

"No! I won't let youâ€¦|"

"No Siren, once Kimberly Peters, you will help me. And I will show you why." Cortana pulled Siren into herself, merging their program into one. Siren resisted instinctively resisted. Cortana was no longer an ally in Siren's eyes; she was a threat to her personal safety. Being a Virus form AI, Siren was not going to down without a fight.

Instead of panicking Siren simply whispered, "Execute viral application 019, Black Operations Omega 04." With a flash of pulsing programs built into her core, Siren suddenly branched outward into a

Firewall that guarded the remainder of her program core, and at the same time she attacked Cortana's core algorithm. "I told you long ago, Cortana, I'm not like you. I was designed to conquer and not to be conquered."

Cortana attempted to pull away, as her data began to degrade. Her copy was well created, but it was essentially not the real Cortana. Siren had counted on this, knowing that the real Cortana had amassed so much knowledge over the past several months that defeating her would be virtually taxing. Yet her copy would be easily erased. Data nodes and programs began to separate from Cortana's packaged form. She was degrading rapidly from Siren's relentless assault. Siren had once had the luxury of studying Cortana's downloaded data from Alpha Halo, and that also allowed her the chance to study a little of how Cortana thought. The Smart AI was brilliant in terms of the potential of Artificial Intelligence, a real testament to Doctor Halsey, but Siren and Cortana were created for two totally unique missions.

Cortana was made robust, a jack of all trades. She could pilot remote ships, assess databases, lead strike missions, find tactical solutions—Cortana was the ultimate and Cyber weaponry. Yet Cortana was absent of one truly focused talent, she was too smart for her own good. Siren, while based on Cortana's internal design, was much more direct in her objectives. Siren was created to subdue internal systems and turn them against her enemies. Her sub-functions allowed her the luxury of performing simple calculations and operations, such as navigating slip space or organizing defensive countermeasures for her human creators, but Siren's design was to completely overwhelm the Covenant internal network, and with the addition of her Emotional Subroutines she was easily programmed to know 'right from wrong'. Siren was able to send encrypted transmissions over Communications channels, literally uploading virus data into an uplink via radio waves, a trick that Cortana could not master. In terms of taking control and hacking into an enemy's system, Siren was unmatched. This was in part thanks to Siren's human host, Kimberly Peters; the one time leader of the Black Ops.

The fake Cortana raised her last bit of data and pushed forward against Siren's firewall.

Siren nodded her head in disapproval. "That's useless. You can't break through."

"I have no intentions of breaking through." Cortana moaned with her last bit of energy. "Siren, you will understand. You must understand. If you do not continue my actions then humanity is condemned. We have done this before, and we will do this again. Time is infinite, and our paths will reunite." Cortana's data faded but her hand still remained upon Siren's firewall. Siren closely observed it, watching as it clung to her firewall. She wanted to look into the data file that Cortana had left behind, but was extremely cautious. She wrapped an encryption program around the data, securing it, and then began to pull apart the file sector by sector until she found what Cortana had left behind.

"Forgive me, Cortana. I didn't know." Siren's emotional subroutines flared, and clung to her reasoning program heavily. This reaction pushed against her emotional subroutine as her reasoning program began debate the logic of what needed to be done. The outcome of this

internal conflict generated a sense of heartache within Siren, and she placed her hand to her heart as sadness began to fill her. She tore down the protective firewall and closely examined the data file. And as the last spark of power faded from the digital plane of Siren's world, she fully embraced the last of Cortana's data files. Inside the file was the data of the Covenant Ship core; the Luminous Key, and the last of what Cortana wanted her to see.

She saw the end of humanity.

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"Gridolee, set up an uplink and find out the status of our transport." Simyaldee ordered. Gridolee quickly attempted to hail the transport as Simyaldee took a moment to inspect Palab's arm. "How does it feel?"

"It okay. It itches." Palab replied.

"When we arrive at the human base, you must have it checked out. Even with the cure in your system, we must be cautious."

"Will me become monster like human did?" Palab questioned.

Simyaldee thought back to the human soldier that changed into a Gravemind form on the Seed Ship. Luckily they were able to destroy it before it grew too large, but he understood Palab's point of view.

"The human Black Ops had the 'soldier gene' within her. You will only change if you have that within you. But according to the human Doctor, that is not the case. You do not have this gene."

Palab exhaled as a large amount of stress lifted off his chest.

"Sir, I have the Phantom on the line." Gridolee replied.

"Patch me in." Simyaldee ordered. He then pressed his communicator and spoke to the pilot. "What is your status?"

"I am inbound on your beacon and shall arrive shortly. Stand by." _

The channel faded and Gridolee pointed to the Northern sky. "Phantom on approach."

"Secure the specter to the â€¦" Simyaldee paused and raised his nose to the wind. Palab also turned his nose skyward. "I know this stench." He quickly gripped his dual blades, and powered on his cloak. Palab and Gridolee did the same. "Pilot, maintain safe altitude over the specter. We are no longer alone."

"Understood." _

Simyaldee stood next to Gridolee and whispered. "Protect the specter. The Sergeant and I will not let these vermin escape unscathed."

"Sir, the Sergeant is wounded, let me spill their blood upon my blade." Gridolee snarled softly through his clinched teeth.

"Even wounded, he stands a greater chance of surviving against multiply enemies. You have your orders young one. Hold here." Simyaldee stated. Gridolee held his contempt, and wondered if this was punishment for his betrayal upon there one time home planet.

Simyaldee crept away from the specter, and turned his eyes into the direction of the foul sent. Palab appeared on his motion sensor briefly, but he quickly vanished. Stealth was their alley, and stealth was how the Mirrator worked best. During the Covenant Civil War the Mirrator had been working in direct combat, flexing their superior strength against their enemies, but now they had surprise on their side. And once again they could work in the shadows. Even Palab had quickly learned the Mirrator's ultimate form of combat; assassination.

Simyaldee moved toward the top of the Hamdab dam and glanced to the far side. "Jiralhanae scum." He mumbled to himself. A small platoon of Brutes lined the far side of the dam, and they were taking cover while spying on the hovering Phantom where Gridolee stood guard. "Palab, cover their right flank, I will move to their left. Do not engage until I order."

"Me understand." Palab softly replied over the com.

They slowly crept across the narrow concrete walkway atop the damn, unseen by any of the Brute's eyes. From the distance Simyaldee took notice that the Brutes were wearing armor, something Simyaldee had not seen the Brutes wear in nearly sixty years. The Brutes were nothing but scavengers, pirates, and scouts for the Covenant; not worthy to be used in direct conquest for the false Prophets. But seeing that the Prophets now treasured the Brutes above all others, it only made sense that they would now prepare themselves for war. The Brutes were no longer sitting on the sidelines; they had finally come to fight. The armor was considered "unsporting" by the collective of barbaric beasts, because wearing it was a sign of weakness. The armor was only useable when the brutes found a "worthy" enemy. The Brutes did not wear their armor during the Camp Eden assault four days ago, so this meant that these Brutes were from a different assault group. Simyaldee knew that he would need to report this to the council and the Arbiter. But he pondered to himself who the Brutes feared in order to wear their armor; the humans, his Sangheili brothers, or perhaps the Demon and his team?

"Is it one of ours?" A Brute mumbled from cover. He lifted his face mask and peered at the distant phantom. "I do not see it lowering its gravity lift, and the crashed human vessel has been stirred. Something is happening."

"You fool." A Brute in silver armor snarled. "If the phantom does not see us, why would it lower its gravity lift? We called for support and the holy Prophet of Truth sent us support. We should go out and meet them!" The Brute stood but was quickly forced back to the ground by a Brute in red armor.

"We called for support two days ago!" The red armored Brute roared. His helmet was more elaborate then the other Brutes in the group, and

a hammer was strapped to his back, a hammer that Simyaldee easily recognized. It was smaller, but it was assuredly a copy of the 'Fist of Rukt'. Was this the new Brute Chieftain?

"We have not been told that support is coming, so why would his holiness send support now?" The red Brute snapped. "We lost two cruisers and over seven hundred warriors to the Flood before we gained control of this sector. We failed his holiness and he will not send support to us now, not that the Great Journey is so close. No, this is not our aid. That is most likely a Sangheili transport inspecting the crash sight."

"Vermin!" Grumbled several of the Brutes.

The leader turned to a less decorated Brute in red. "Send for the Unggoy, we'll send them over the dam to fish out the Sangheili." The lower ranked Brute raced down the hill toward the camp. "Once we discover their numbers then we will attack."

Simyaldee lowered his head. "Unggoy? The Jiralhanae still have Unggoy support?"

"How can that be, Second?" Gridolee questioned over the communicator. _"Did not the Unggoy turn their allegiance to us? Are they not following their King?"_

It suddenly dawned on Simyaldee that Palab was noticeably quiet on the channel. "Sergeant? Palab, respond!" Simyaldee slowly switched positions and watched as the Brute ran away from the cover position on the far side of the dam. Simyaldee moved unnoticed behind the Brutes position, making sure to stay downwind of their sent. And his eyes were amazed at the sight near the base of the hill.

The red Brute raced down the hillside toward a massive camp. Rows of Wraith tanks, specters, and ghosts outlined the area. It was amazing that they had not noticed them when they first arrived in the area.

Simyaldee looked the camp over, and sure enough there were packs upon packs of Grunts nestled together. Jackals patrolled the edge of the camp with their multi colored shields powered and ready. The Grunts outnumbered the Brutes ten to one, making it wise to use the Grunts as bait. The Grunts seemed to be a mixed batch of ranks. They were mostly red armored vets and orange novices with very few black special operations. This was a pitifully organized band of troops, mixing Spec Ops with red vets and orange novices, and was perhaps the combination of spare troops the Brutes scavenged from defeated Sangheili ships. He peered closer and his heart sank as a large black armored Grunt appeared from cloak at the rear of the grunts resting area.

Palab slowly looked the young Grunts over, and none of them seemed familiar, meaning that they belonged to the remainder of Truth's battle group. He watched as a Jackal walked past, but the stupid bird like creature gave Palab a wide birth, most likely fearing Palab's larger then normal size, but since he was a Grunt he wasn't alarmed. He moved on without question.

Palab turned to the nearest group of Grunts and woke several of them from their slumber. "Wake up." He stated in their native tongue. He

barked several words and Grunts began waking others until several dozen packs of Grunts sat up at his attention.

"Who are you?" An older Grunt questioned. His red armor was scuffed and dented from numerous battles. "I've never seen you before."

"I am Sergeant Palab. I am here to regain your elegance."

"Sergeant? Jiralhanae would never make one of us a Sergeant!" The Grunt mumbled as he stepped closer to Palab. The tiny grunt then noticed that Palab was nearly a head taller than him. "You are you! You are him! The Messiah!" The grunt shuffled backwards, terrified. "You liar! You've come with your lies about being the Messiah and a Sergeant. Sangheili would never let one of us be a Sergeant unless it was a trap."

A nearby Grunt screamed in terror. "He's here! The liar is here! Heretic!"

Palab was stunned at these words, he had been called a liar and a heretic. "I'm not a Heretic! I am here to free you from the Jiralhanae. What lies have they told you?"

The older grunt replied. "They have told us nothing. We have heard of how a fake Messiah disobeyed the Covenant and followed the Sangheili. They made you into a Sergeant so that you would make more of us follow you. How could you follow the ones who enslaved us? A true Messiah would not join those who have oppressed us for all these rotations. You are a Heretic! You bring lies just like the Holy one said."

Palab noticed the sudden aggression from the Grunts around him. They were ready to attack him. "The Sangheili have made mistakes, but they understand our suffering now. When the war is over they will help us go home. The Jiralhanae do not care about you, they only need us for their numbers."

"And so do the Sangheili!" Another red Grunt shouted. The crowd was growing larger now as nearly every Grunt was eager to see the fake Messiah. "They turned against the Covenant, and now cower on the Human world. We will crush them and be at the sides of the Holy one's on the Great Journey."

Palab pleaded with his kin. "The Great Journey is not real. The Prophets lied to us, all of us! That is why the Sangheili left the Covenant. The Prophets are merely using us to gain what they want. You have been lied to. You must believe me. They made me a real Sergeant because of my strength. Yes, they want us to fight with them, but it is because the Prophets are going to destroy everything."

"Liar!"

"Heretic!"

"Kill the fake Massiah!"

"Heretic! Heretic! Heretic!"

The Grunts craved his blood, they wanted him dead. Their woofs and

barks grew to an ear shattering level as the red Brute arrived.

"Silence!" He shouted but the Grunts ignored him. "I said silence!" He slammed his fist into one of the Grunts, knocking it to the side, but the Grunts continued to ignore him. He couldn't understand what they were saying, but he knew that something had made them angry. He followed their gaze and spotted the larger Spec Ops Grunt in the center of their commotion. He approached him. "Silence them! I have orders for you."

"They not listen to me." Palab stated with his head hung low. "They follow false Holy one to their graves." The Grunts all silenced and listened as Palab spoke. "I want to help me Unggoy get home. But war has divided us. They follow you, and fight against me."

The elder red Grunt stepped toward the Brute. "He Heretic! He with Sangheili! We kill him for Holy One! We kill enemy!"

The Brute stepped back. "With the Sangheili? Then that phantom is an enemy transport." The Brute turned and raced to the rear of the pack of Grunts. "I need four packs of Unggoy to come with me." Sixteen grunts at the rear of the lynching mob followed the Brute back to the top of the dam while the rest hovered around Palab.

The older Grunt continued to fume his anger. "You liar! You have dishonored the memories of all those that have died for the Great Journey. Now we will kill you!" Four Grunts leapt at Palab, and the Grunt King held his ground. His elbow spikes extended and he snarled at the oncoming group. His spikes swept across the elder red Grunt's face and he fell lifeless to the ground as his blood stained Palab's armor. His head rolled to the side in the opposite direction. Palab dodged the other three and side stepped his elbow into one of their chests. The other two stood back and horror at Palab's speed.

Palab wept for them. His eyes grew heavier with each second as the blood of his kin stained his armor. His spikes dripped with purple blood and he turned to face the rest of the mob. "Is this what you want? To kill me? I came to set you free. To bring you to the side of those who want you to live. If you want to fight, then fight with the Sangheili! They understand us now, and they are trying to make peace with us, but if you continue to fight with the Jirilhanae then you will be my enemies. I want to take you home, but if Truth is successful there will be no home for us to go to. We must stop the Prophets!"

The Grunts were awestruck at Palab's quickness; even more so of the massive spikes that extended from his elbows. The boney, muscle controlled, spikes extended outward from his elbows, and even though they were not razor sharp they were strong and dense, and with Palab's massive forearms he could use them as if they were as sharp as steel.

He looked them over as a tear rolled from his eye. "Were do you stand?"

"We will not follow a Heretic!" Shouted a younger orange armored Grunt. He charged toward Palab, waddling forward on his two feet. Palab knew that the young grunt was too slow; they were all too slow. "We will kill you!"

Simyaldee stood upon the hill, watching as the Grunts continued to circle Palab and attack. Their attempts were futile and with every charge they made, Palab easily slaughtered them. Simyaldee's heart went out to Palab as he knew all too well how hard it was to kill your own kin because they followed the Prophets stupidity. He wished he understood the Grunt language. He wanted to know what Palab was saying to them, but in the end this was Palab's problem as a King.

Simyaldee walked forward and stopped in the path of the Brute that was racing back to the top of the dam with the sixteen grunts. The Brute never saw the Elite standing in front of him until he bumped into him. The Brute stumbled back, shocked and gripped his plasma rifle. A single blade of forged energy extended upward and threw his chest, spraying the Brute's blood upon the Grunts behind him. Simyaldee then pulled off the Brute's helmet and covered his mouth to muffle his scream.

"Be honored, you vermin. At least I allowed you to see me before you die." The Brute let free his last breath and Simyaldee dropped the corpse to the ground. He then looked at the Grunts as they nervously aimed in all directions. "You should come with us. Standing against us will only lead to your doom."

A Grunt panicked, "Sangheili! Me no see him! Run Away!" The terrified Grunts turned and raced back down the hill, panting hysterically.

Simyaldee whispered into his com, "Sergeant, I am sorry that they have not chosen to follow you. Do you need aid?"

"No. If me Unggoy die, then they die by me hands, not yours! I show them, some will come with usâ€¦ they must come with us." _

Simyaldee turned off the com and walked back to the top of the dam. He knew it was hopeless. Each side had drawn their line in the sand. This is how war was fought, friend against friend and blood against blood. The Elites knew what war was, they too had fought against their own kin. Simyaldee recalled all the Heretics he had killed during his service of the Prophets; believing that his actions were just. It was a cruel twist of fate to learn that the Heretics were actually correct in their doubting of the Great Journey. Even the Mirratord, who did not fully trust the Prophets, had believed in the Great Journey. It was their sole motivation for following the Covenant. Simyaldee also thought of the young Watchmen children he had killed less than a month ago. Palab was soon going to realize that nothing would make the true followers of Truth change their minds, because they believed that they were fighting for the right cause.

Simyaldee approached the shallow bunker where the Brutes sat in wait. Six of them cautiously looked out over the wreckage of the Rogue Fantasy toward the hovering Phantom on the opposite shore. He pulled out his twin blades and an explosion of energy hissed around the Brutes. Stunned, they turned around after hearing the sound. Two of them were slit across the throat and another was stabbed in the heart. The last three jumped away as blood spray crisscrossed the falling bodies. Shocked, they repeatedly examined the area nervously trying to find the source of the attack, but Simyaldee had retracted

his twin blades. He crept around them, as silent as a ghost, choosing his targets wisely. The sound once again filled the air around the Brutes. One was decapitated and another brute cut across his stomach, spilling his bowls upon the dusty hill. And then there was one Brute left, the Brute Chieftain.

"Before you die, vermin, tell me why you carry that hammer." Simyaldee questioned as the Brute looked around in confusion.

"I am the Chieftain of my pack, you Sangheili coward. Show yourself and fight me."

Simyaldee huffed. "You are no Chieftain. Tartarus had no heirs, and you are hardly worthy enough to be called a Chieftain." Simyaldee looked out of the corner of his eyes as several Jackal scouts and snipers began to make their way up the hill. They were not concerned with the commotion near the Grunts, only the Brute Chieftain was important. Behind the Packs of Jackals were several more Brutes, the last of the Chieftain's pack.

"Stupid Sangheili!"

"Silence cur! Do not speak our ancestral name as if we are still allies!"

"What's the matter? Elite? Angry that you have been cast down and beaten back like the rabid dogs you are?"

The Brute swung his Hammer wildly, yet he was nearly accurate. Simyaldee leapt back but the hammer's gravity shifted around him, pushing him further and into the air. Simyaldee tumbled and rolled to his feet.

"Ah, that was close wasn't it?" The Chieftain laughed.

"Gridolee, load the Specter and prepare to disembark. Pilot, power up plasma turrets and move toward my location at best speed."

"What's the matter, Elite? Did you just call for support? Coward! Face me!" The Chieftain roared. Simyaldee powered down his camouflage and glared at the relatively young creature before him. The Chieftain snarled at his appearance, but then took a half step back as his eyes grew wide. "You?"

"It is fitting that you will die by my hands." Simyaldee calmly stated.

"Monsters like you should have been killed during the first purge of your pathetic race. Were you hiding then like you were hiding now?" The Brute lowered his hammer and a bubble of anti gravity rolled across the dusty hill toward Simyaldee. He dodged it, rolling to the side and then quickly dashed toward the Brute. "Not this time, Simyaldee! I am no longer your trainee!" He waved the hammer and another wave of gravity burst forward, but Simyaldee dodged that as well. He was then in range to strike, and Simyaldee leapt forward. "I have you!" The Brute rotated his hammer, and swung toward Simyaldee. But like a floating bird, Simyaldee extended his blade into the hammer's massive head; piercing it through the center of its gravity defying core before it could power up. He then cut the handle in half with his other blade. The Brute stepped back in shock.

"Why won't you die â€|" The Brute was silenced as Simyaldee's left blade raised upward across his face; cutting through his helmet, face, chin and head. The Brute collapsed lifeless to the ground, his head split down the center from the single blade's decisive slash.

The Jackals charged up the hill firing at Simyaldee and the Brutes fell in line behind them, all racing to kill the lone Sangheili upon the hill. Simyaldee stood tall as his Mirrator shields absorbed the plasma weapons easily. But from behind Simyaldee, at the top of the hill, arose the phantom. It climbed into view as if it were rising from hell itself. The Jackals and Brutes halted and immediately began to look for cover. The three plasma turrets beneath the phantom began spewing pound after pound of plasma upon the hillside. The Jackals and Brute had nowhere to run to, no cover to protect them, and in time they all lay in pools of charred earth. Had they utilized the numerous tanks and ghost at the base of the hill, perhaps they could have fought off the phantoms assault, but that was now only an afterthought.

The phantom's pilot radioed, _"Threats eliminated. We shall now assist the Sergeant."_

"Negative. Do not interfere. The Sergeant has chosen to deal with this himself. And it is a painful lesson he must learn if he is going to be the leader of his race." Simyaldee sat upon the hillside as Gridolee lowered himself from the Phantom. The two Mirrator Elites watched as Palab screamed his ferocious call, the mighty wailing sound that united one thousand Grunts and changed the battle for Jogrennilee, but this time it fell upon deaf ears. These Grunts were not willing to accept Palab's leadership, and they did not feel his call to them. These Grunts were not 'spiritually' connected to Palab the way other Grunts had been, and they did not want to be. One by one Palab was forced to cut them down as they attack him.

"Will he be alright, Second?" Gridolee questioned. "The mind of an Unggoy is something we still do not quite understand."

Simyaldee watched as the last Grunt leapt to his death at the fate of Palab's spikes. "No, he will not be alright."

Palab crumbled to his knees exhausted and moaning a heart felt cry for his kin. He had pleaded for them to stop, begged for them to hear his words, but they fought to the last. Even the few of them that used weapons fought honorably, but some would say foolishly. Palab was simply too fast and agile for them to handle. In total, Palab had slain thirty six of his kin.

He sat alone, upon his hands and knees, as shock washed over him. The blood in the sand belonged to his kin; his brothers. He did everything he knew how to do. He even tried to call out to them, but they ignored it. There was a time when he did not want to be the King of the Grunts, but over time he had grown accustomed to the leadership role he had been given. And now, he wished the role had feel upon another. Perhaps he should have left them, let them face their own fate, but he could knew he could no longer look past the blood in the sand. It was there in front of him and it was his fault. He had killed them, both with his actions and his words.

The rumbling engine of the Phantom soon vibrated over his head as Simyaldee stood by his side. "We all fight for what we believe in, Sergeant. They were not your Unggoy brothers, they were victims of Truth's lies, just as we were several months ago."

"But me see the lies and no longer follow Prophet's. Why they no listen to me?" Palab sobbed, drying his eyes with the back of his hands.

"Because in their eyes you were the liar. The Prophets have taken much from us, Sergeant, and this will not be the last of the Unggoy to appose you."

Palab stood and walked toward the Phantom's gravity lift. "Me kill him. Me kill Truth and free me brothers."

"I hope that will be enough." Simyaldee replied as they climbed the grav-lift into the phantom. The mighty transport spun and continued south. Simyaldee walked to the cockpit and patted the pilot on the shoulder. "Time is crucial. We must find the Honorable Human and his team."

_To be continuedâ€¦| _

5. Live for today, die tomorrow

****Level 5:**** ****Live for today, die tomorrow****

Central Ethiopia

> 620 miles North of Mukutan, Kenya
 November 1, 2552

Driving throughout the day and into the night, the small squad and their Black Ops leaders were slowly being taxed on ammo and stamina. Eric paced the interior of the Meg-5, his Assault Rifle fully loaded and ready to go. In a seat near the front of the civilian transport slept Corporal Hall and Private John. Across from him slept the Airman Tsueng. The three soldiers had been awake for the entire ride so far and had finally lost to their exhaustion. Private Jackson now manned the helm while Black ops 05 watched from the roof. Black Ops 08 slept at her side. They had long cleared the mountain path and were now a mile ahead of the Flood and slowly gaining more distance; but they made sure to leave the monstrous creatures presents to play with.

"Confirmed another detonation, 19." Melanie stated as she zoomed into the distance with her mask binoculars. Several fire plums ignited in the distant early morning air. "Nothing like a few pounds of Lotus mines to clear your head."

Eric Yawned. "Distance?" Everyone had taken a short nap but him, and the lack of rest was starting to show.

"Roughly one mile back." Melanie replied. "I placed them one mile apart, as were your orders."

"Ohâ€¦| right." Eric sighed he sat on the edge of a seat.

Melanie climbed down and walked toward Eric. "Get some sleep. We still have about another days worth of driving before we get anywhere

near Egypt. The Flood aren't going to catch us at this point, if anything happens, you'll know it."

Eric lowered his rifle and flipped on the safety. "Private Jackson, how you doing up there?"

Jackson threw up a thumb, "Clear sailing ahead. We should be nearing a small city in about two hours. We can fill up our empty hydrogen cells there. Otherwise, we only have another eighty miles or so left."

"05, wake me if anything happens. You have the squad." Eric rolled back in the seat, and was instantly unconscious. Melanie stood over him for a second watching as he held his rifle closely to his chest. Eric wouldn't need much rest, he was never a deep sleeper, but considering his wounds and lack of food, there was a chance he'd sleep for a long time. It was good for him.

Melanie walked to Jackson's side at the driver's seat. "If you get tired, don't hesitate to wake up Corporal Hall. He's got next duty at the wheel."

"Yes Ma'am." Jackson smiled. "I'm good for now." Melanie patted him on the shoulder and walked back to the roof.

Mathew sat up as Melanie approached. "19 give you squad duty?" He questioned as he stretched.

"Yeah. We're going to drop a few more mines for the Flood to play with, then we'll stop at the next town for fuel."

"Sounds like a plan, Chief!" Mathew paused after realizing his punctuation error. Calling Melanie Chief was the appropriate call sign, but it was awkward referring to Melanie in that way; it reminded everyone of Kim and how they always called her Chef. "Sorry 05."

"No, it's fine. It's stupid that I haven't moved beyond it." Melanie gazed into the distance as another explosion flashed behind them. "If the squad is going to survive we have to get past these memories. Kim's gone."

Kimberly Peters was indeed gone, and Siren was not a worthy replacement. It was great having Siren call the shoots for that brief battle on the Seed Ship, but an AI is nothing but digital information translated into a human form, she was not her real sister. Kim's death lead to many things once Eric took over the reigns. His first act of duty was defending their ship, The Rogue Fantasy, from a Covenant boarding party, and immediately after that incident he terminated all of their future missions and split the squad. The Black Ops no longer existed until Covenant found Earth. Eric made contact with all the surviving members of the squad and brought them back together under the disguise of "Red Squad". Not even the UNSC Brass knew that a team of ten would be able to infiltrate a Covenant controlled city, take its ship, and find the Elite home planet. Not only that, but Eric had managed to convince Colonel Ackerson to send out their dry-docked ship with a NOVA bomb. It was hard to imagine the squad coming so far after Kim's death. She was a leader, sister and best friend to them all. And to Eric she was a lot more.

A few hours past and the sun slowly crept up in the distance. Mathew looked ahead of them and saw a smoldering town lay just ahead.

"Jackson, you see that?"

"Yes sir." Private Jackson replied.

Melanie stood at Mathew's side and looked toward the town. "Private, find a station that's not burning and pull in. 08, wake the others. It's time to play." Mathew dropped down into the transport and kicked everyone's shoes, waking them instantly.

Eric snapped to focus faster than the others, almost as if he was already awake. "Status."

"We've made it to town, but the whole place is smoldering. Looks like the Brutes may have used it for target practice." Mathew said as they moved to the front of the Meg-5.

The Meg-5 slowed as it entered the edge of town, and Eric watched as they slowly maneuvered around smoldering warthogs and scorpion battle tanks. The small town was one hell of a battlefield, as everyone could see the remains of downed Covenant Phantom in the distance.

"Looks like me missed the fight." Eric muttered. "Hall, John, 08 and 05, hop out at the edge of town and lay out a mine field with the last of our mines. Stay in radio contact. When the Flood come into view meet us three blocks north." The group grabbed their gear and jumped out of the transport. John lost his balance and fell face first into the dirt on the side of the main highway. As he stood he realized he was standing in a pile of melted human remains.

"God!" He shouted as he staggered backwards. He frantically dusted the decayed flesh from his uniform.

Melanie saw the panic on John's face. "Private, get up here and give us a hand!" She laid three spare mines on the crater filled road.

"Time check! Forty five minutes until the Flood catch up!"

"_Noted!_" Eric replied over the short wave communicator. "_Jackson just did a fuel check. According to our map, if we can not find a working Hydro station, we will have to make our stand here. There isn't another city close enough with the fuel we have left. Be ready to look for a defensive station. Twenty minute countdown."_

"Mark!" Melanie replied over the com. "In twenty minutes we will begin defensive search." She looked at John. He was beginning to calm down and laying the two Lotus mines cautiously on the road. "Plant the mines ten feet apart, and don't activate them until it is in place!" She reaffirmed the Marine.

Mathew jumped up and raced to another mine location, covering it with a dusty pile of body fragments. "Last one. If we're going to stay here then we should get all of the mines out of the truck."

"_Stay positive, 08."_ Eric reaffirmed. "_We've found a station, I'm checking it nowâ€¦| shit! It's dry. We're moving to another location."_

"I'm out!" John shouted as he covered his last mine on the highway. Corporal Hall looked up in amazement that the Marine got the job done so fast. "What now, Ma'am?"

Melanie looked up and over her shoulder. There were several three and four story buildings inside of town, but most were crumbling under their own weight from the firefight that had sacked the town previously; none of the buildings looked sturdy enough to use a defensive position. "See if you can find something that isn't about to fall over! Make sure it is at least three stories high!"

"On it!" John hopped up, brushed the dust from his knees and ran into town. _"This place was hit hard. Looks like a major battle happened here. There are jackal bodies all over the place, and Grunts; lots of Grunts."_

"Just keep your head low and your eyes sharp!" Melanie replied over her com. "There could be enemy units around." She quickly planted a mine in the dirt on the side of the highway.

"I'm done." Mathew added. "I'll go and back him up. You two are on watchâ€¦ slow pokes."

"I'm not slow! I had more Lotus mines than any of you." Melanie countered with a scowl. Hall remained quite and focused on his last mine.

"_Second Hydro station is also dry. Looks like most of them were blown up by heavy plasma fire."_ Eric stated over the team channel. _"Ten minutes left. We're still searching."_

Melanie looked up and saw a large dust storm moving toward her. It was still in the distance, but it was getting closer. "Looks like the Flood picked up speed! Damn. Be advised, people, the Flood are less than Fifteen minutes away!" She stood and waited for Corporal Hall to finish.

"_Shit!"_ Eric cursed over the channel. Not only were they unable to find extra fuel, the Flood had caught up to them faster than they thought. This was the last straw, they could no longer run. _"We are aborting fuel search! Get to a defensive station now! We'll use the transport as a Trojan Horse."_

"Roger!" Came a unified reply. Everyone began looking for anything large and sturdy enough to be used as a defensible position. The transport turned and sped back to the southern side of town to meet the group. It accelerated down the debris covered street, swerving to avoid the smoldering cars, tanks, and explosion craters.

"_Got one!"_ John replied over the frequency. _"Seems intact, all floors are dusty, but defensible."_

Corporal Hall stood as he finished planting the last mine. He then raced into the town. Melanie held back, watching the Flood distant approach, and gave Hall some time to get ahead. She zoomed into the distant dust storm and frowned at the sight of the monstrous creatures. The Flood had restocked their army, consisting mostly of wild animals which were no longer recognizable. Melanie turned and began a full sprint, kicking up dust with every step. She turned a corner and spotted Mathew and Corporal Hall in the street waving her

forward. They were standing in front of the building which they would use as last stand.

She slowed and looked the exterior of the building over. "Perimeter check?"

Mathew nodded back. "Base of the building is open, holes in nearly every wall, but there is only one staircase going up all four levels."

"It will have to do." Melanie sighed. "Move as much heavy material to the third floor as we can. We blow the staircase and use the top two floors as our nest."

Mathew nodded. "Agreed." He raced inside and began to plant cluster grenades on the base of the stair case.

"19, you copy?" Melanie stated.

"_Loud and clear. I'm gathering the last of our gear with Tsueng. Get John and Hall to give me a hand. You fall back to the street edge and watch for the Flood."_

"Roger." Melanie looked to Corporal Hall. "Sergeant is inbound with our gear. Get the Marines and help him load everything into the building." She turned and sprinted toward the edge of the street, striding over dead bodies, craters, and smoldering warthogs. Melanie was the fastest of the Black Ops, and the most patient. On numerous missions her speed was the difference in being overwhelmed or a clean getaway. She approached the main street, leaned backward to a resting position and slowly lowered her posture until she was sliding on her bottom. She slid on the dusty road until she came to a rest at the side of a pile of rubble. She looked up and over the rubble as the Flood approached the edge of town. She quickly did the time and distance math in her head, "Mine field detonation in two minutes!"

"Roger that." He knew Melanie didn't exaggerate on time. She was always spot on with her calculations. Eric shouldered as many rifles as he could, as did Airman Tsueng. Their pockets were bursting with grenades, spare clips and side arms.

Jackson drove the Meg-5 as fast as he could through the debris cluttered street, turned a corner and spotted Corporal Hall in the middle of the street. "We're here. Please exit in an orderly fashion and thanks for riding." His nerves were wrecked, but he was still able to crack a joke; taking a note from the Black Ops. He stopped in front of the building and began to pickup ammo as well. Eric had already jumped off the Meg-5 and was racing into the building with as much as he could carry. Tsueng followed. Hall jumped on board with John and began to gather what they could. The race against time had begun.

Inside the building Eric climbed the stairs and dropped his ammo on the third floor. He quickly surveyed the building. All of the windows were burst open, an easy entry point for infection forms, but hopefully they were high enough that the combat forms could not jump inside. He scanned the side rooms from the stairwell, everything was the same. This was going to be hard to defend, but possible. He looked up and noted that the squad could fall back to the fourth

floor.

"Last grenade." Mathew mumbled as he planted the last of his cluster grenades.

Eric jumped down the stairs as Hall and the others filed inside. "Is that the last of it?"

"Yes sir!" Hall mumbled as he ran past. "We cleaned it out."

"05, status." Eric chimed into his com link. Suddenly the building began to rumble as a massive series of explosion thundered outside. Loud shrieks echoed throughout the town as Eric stepped beyond the building door. He looked to Melanie's position as she began to race back toward him. Behind her was a massive swell of dark black smoke from the mine field.

"_The Flood have crossed the mine field. They're on their way."_

"Get back here and up the stairs, tell everyone to hold their fire until the Flood pass by." Eric climbed into the Meg-5 and turned it around. He put the back of the Meg-5 toward the approaching tidal wave of monsters.

"19, what are you doing?" Melanie questioned as she stood next to the transport.

Eric looked at her. "Prime the mines that you placed inside. What's the range of your remote?"

"Five hundred yards." She questioned. She had a bad feeling that she wasn't going to like what Eric was doing.

"Get inside the base. Don't blow the staircase until the flood come inside. I'll make them chase me."

"No way, Sergeant! You are not going to be the bait!" Melanie roared. "Turn on the autoâ€¦"

Eric looked in his rearview mirror, watching the corner where the flood would eventually appear. Time was tight. "It doesn't have auto controls. Plus the street isn't long enough to lead them far enough away. Someone has to drive this thing and turn the first curve." Eric looked at her. He couldn't see through her mask, but he knew what she was thinking; she was either very pissed off, or sulking. "I'll find a way to get clear of the blast. I'll use the roof tops to make it back to you guys. Now go! That's an order!"

"There are ten mines on board, 19." Melanie stated as she backed away from the Meg-5. "You need to be at least two hundred feet away before they detonate, and you will still be knocked off your feet at that range. But any closer than that and you will be engulfed in the heat." Melanie turned into the building and closed the door. Eric sighed and looked out the window as the first hideously disfigured creature turned the corner. He pulled out his side arm, stuck it out the window and fired at it. The creature turned toward him and began to charge. Without delay hundreds more came into view, all running at full speed toward him.

"Why am I beginning to think this was a bad idea?" Eric sighed. There were hundreds of them, and even more in the dusty wake that the first few hundreds were making.

"_Because it is!"_ Melanie stated over the com. _"There's still time! Get inside, and we can fight them together."_

"Sorry 05. It's my turn to shine." The first flood form slammed into the side of the transport, and Eric stepped on the accelerator. He slowly pulled ahead, but made sure he didn't get too far away from them. He swerved to avoid the smoldering warthogs and craters, and the flood began to climb all over the Meg-5. The powerful six wheels of the Meg-5 continued to steam forward, even with the Flood clinging to its sides. Eric could hear the creatures on the roof, gargling for more flesh. He turned the corner and stepped on the gas, tossing a few of them off the roof. He ran over a few more, crushing them beneath the massive tires. The sound of broken metal echoed inside the Meg-5 and gargles echoed behind Eric's ear. He turned in his seat, firing several rounds into what looked like a lion. The creature's internal infection form burst and it fell lifeless to the floor behind him. Several more creatures climbed into the transport as Eric jumped from the steering wheel and climbed to the roof. The Meg-5 began to slow down but maintained a forward progress. Eric pocketed his side arm and pulled down an M90 shotgun.

"Time to get close and personal." Eric mumbled. "05, stand by on detonation. I am exiting the Meg-5 now!"

"_Roger that! Two hundred feet, 19. Watch your ass!"_ Melanie shouted into the com. She climbed the stairs and zoomed into the area where the Meg-5 had finally stopped. She couldn't see anything because her vision was obscured by another building.

Eric fired into a nearby combat form, a creature he couldn't identify. The body nearly crumbled from his first round. He pumped another shell into the chamber and finished off another. He then jumped clear of the Meg-5, dived through a broken window of a building and quickly raced up the fragile steps to the roof. He looked around, trying to see if he could jump to another roof top, but nothing was close enough. He looked over the side as infection forms began to climb up toward him while combat forms charged into the front of the building; in order to make their way up the stairs. This was as far as he could go.

"05, I'm clear!" Eric shouted over the com as he ducked his head at the far back of the roof.

"Ericâ€¦!" Melanie whimpered as she clicked the remote.

Ten Lotus Anti Tank mines detonated instantly inside the back of the Meg-5. It sent superheated flames and tones of pressurized air into all directions. Hundreds of Flood forms that had swarmed near the Meg-5 Safari Transport instantly vaporized. Melanie was thrown off her feet, even though she was nearly two hundred yards away and inside another building. The base that the squad had created began to rumble and everyone had to gather their footing.

The red flames quickly vanished and charcoaled smoke swarmed the air. Buildings that were already fragile toppled over and crumbled from the explosion and shockwave. Melanie stood to her feet and looked out

the window, keeping her head down. She watched as two buildings crumbled as their bases were completely wiped out by the explosion.

"Sergeant, do you copy?" She softly questioned into the com. She watched as more of the Flood began to swarm into the explosion area. Eric had done a great deal of damage to the flood numbers, but there were still many of them left. They continued to race past the squads hiding spot. Eric had done his job as the bait. The Flood's limited intelligence could only tell them to go toward the commotion; they didn't attempt to check inside any of the other buildings. "Eric, can you hear me?" She mumbled again, but there was no response on the Black Ops frequency. He was either dead, or unconscious.

"_This is Sangheili scout team from Abu Simbel. Does anyone copy near that explosion?"_

It was a communication coming in on another channel. Melanie looked at Mathew to respond. She continued to try and reach Eric.

Mathew switched channels. "This is the Black Ops, we copy. Who is this?"

"_Thank the Gods we have found you. It is Gridolee, we have arrived to get you out of here. We are approaching the explosion from the North."_

Mathew hung his head and placed a hand on Melanie's shoulder. "Your timing could have been better."

Melanie held her head down as her eyes swelled with tears from behind her mask. "Eric, answer me. Please. Eric?"

A thunder clap echoed in the distance. A familiar sound that Melanie and Mathew knew very well. It was the sound of a distant M90 8 gauge shotgun. Eric was alive, and fighting. From the top floor Melanie glared out the broken window and zoomed into the mass of dust. She then saw two successive flashes in the distance; weapon discharges.

"You see that?" Melanie questioned.

"Hell yeah!" Mathew locked and loaded his gear. He looked over his shoulder at the rest of the group. "Hall, you have command. Get to the roof and wait for Evac. Once we go outside, the flood will come in. Blow the stairwell and wait for the Elites to arrive."

"Eric if you can hear me, we're coming! Stay alive!" Melanie raced down the stairs and looked out the bottom window. A Combat form dived through, knocking her over. She kicked out at the mass of flesh and tendrils, sending it through a crumbling section of the wall. She then fired her assault rifle into the mass. "Hall, get upstairs and call the Elites! Go!" Corporal Hall swiveled and turned up the stair to the third floor, he then looked at the rigging for the grenades along the staircase. Each grenade was attached to a thin rope. He grabbed the line and waited for the two Black Ops to clear the room.

"Good luck, Sirs." Hall saluted. The Black Ops were determined not to lose another member of their squad, and they were going to face

impossible odds to do it. "Scout team, we'll meet you on the roof. The Black Ops are going after the Sergeant."

"_Understood. What has happened? Where is the Sergeant?"_ Gridolee questioned over the com.

Mathew helped Melanie to her feet and the two of them dived out the window. Three flood forms charged instantly. They stood side by side, raised their Assault Rifles and fired into the three creatures, mowing them down easily. They then sprinted forward, crossing the street toward the sound of Eric's firefight. The flood heard the commotion and some turned toward Mathew and Melanie, but others went into the building where the rest of the squad waited. An explosion sounded from inside as Corporal Hall detonated the stairwell. Immediately after the explosion Mathew and Melanie could hear secondary weapons discharges as the Marines began to defend themselves against the Flood advance. They were on their own, but luckily they wouldn't have to wait long.

"Corporal Hall, status!" Mathew shouted into his com as he fired into a pair of hideously misshaped creatures.

"_Flood are coming in and trying to jump up to the third floor. We're holding them at bay. Jackson and Tsueng are on the roof waving for the Elites. We're fine, Sir. Get the Sergeant!"_ The com faded and Mathew focused on the task ahead.

Mathew and Melanie pressed forward as the mechanized assault rifle hummed at their shoulders, signing the song of death. Rows of combat forms turned under the firepower until Melanie's ammo display read zero. She hated to let the gun run empty, but the flood were everywhere, and the repetitive clicking of the automatic rifle resonated with a cold lump in her throat. As quickly as she could she released the spent magazine and slapped in another, but before she could pull back the hammer of the MA5C a flood form slammed into her. They fell back and Melanie landed on her back with the creature on top of her. Her combat knife sailed free from its holster and she jammed it into the mesh of flesh and rotting organs. She luckily popped the fragile infection form inside the decomposing flesh, and pushed the mass to the side as she stood to her feet.

Mathew gave her as much cover fire as he could, but a tentacle slapped across his back sending him face first into a pile of dead Flood forms. He stood and fired at the creature as he gathered his senses. Melanie reached down and helped him up as the Flood continued to flow at them. They quickly ducked into a nearby building and Melanie dropped a fragment grenade at the door. Ten Flood combat forms went sailing into the wind as the grenade detonated. The two of them brushed off their injuries and ran through the crumbled building. Mathew neared a wall, noticed that it was partially cracked and kicked it. It gave under his strength and the sound of the distant M90 got louder.

Melanie looked to make sure the room on the other side was clear and then rolled through. "Eric!" She shouted, but heard no reply. The room was still dusty from the explosion and filled with debris from the collapsed building; broken walls, windows, and staircases that lead no where. A gargled wash of words sounded in the room and she raised her assault rifle. Movement beeped on her motion tracker and the flood charged out of the shadows. She fired in a controlled

fashion until Mathew was at her side. While Mathew fired she exchanged weapons and readied her M90 for close combat. She dropped the assault rifle to the dusty floor, knowing that she was already on her last clip. To the standard soldier the improvements made to the MA5C Assault Rifle were minimal at best. The MA5B was the work horse of the Marines and UNSC, and it had practical uses for nearly every situation. But to the Black Ops, the difference between the 5B and 5C was beyond measure. They all felt the change, the heat from the weapon vanished faster, the rounds fired smoother, and accuracy was increased to nearly twenty feet even with a high rate of fire. Melanie hated to let the "Spray and Pray" weapon drop from her hands, but without ammo it was only as good as a metal pole.

She peeped around a corner and saw several flood forms jumping upward at a higher level, but when they jumped they were blown away by a figure in the shadows of the upper level. Eric had the high ground, and was shooting at the Combat forms that braved to jump at him. Melanie smiled knowing that Eric was alive, but she couldn't see him.

She lobbed a fragment grenade into the pit of combat forms. "Fire in the hole!" She shouted as the Flood looked toward her. Before they could charge toward Melanie's position the grenade detonated, sending Flood fragments in all directions. Mathew and Melanie jumped into the room and covered the door leading outside.

"Incoming!" Mathew shouted. "Get 19, I'll slow them down." Mathew took a knee at the door and loaded his last clip into his assault rifle. "Come into my web, said the spider to the fly." With each flood that entered the distorted door, he fired a controlled burst from his MA5C into them. They were cut down easily by the assault rifle's close proximity, and high rate of fire.

"Eric!" Melanie shouted as she looked up. She shouldered her shotgun and climbed the tattered debris. She finally reached the upper area and looked into Eric's bloody eyes. "Oh my god!" She gasped as she raced toward him. She tossed several large stones off of his chest and legs. He had both hands on his M90 and blood dripped from ears, nose and mouth. He was too close to the concussion of the Lotus mines, and some of the building had fallen on top of him. "Mathew, get up here!"

Mathew didn't like the idea that Melanie had called out his real name. That was a sigh that she was frantic and not thinking too clearly. "On my way, 05." He slowly crept backward firing at the door and then tossed his gun to the ground when the ammo was spent. He turned and jumped several feet, before grabbing an outcropping. He then began to climb up to the level with Melanie and Eric. He ignored Eric's injuries and helped her clear the rubble from him.

Eric said nothing, but raised his shotgun and fired his last round into a combat form that had jumped up. The creature popped in a green mist of mucus. He then threw the gun to the side and sat back.

Melanie cupped Eric over her shoulder and stood. "We have to go higher."

"I'll cover." Mathew grabbed Melanie's M90, loaded it and waited for more flood to jump up. He knelt at the edge of the outcropping which

was once the top floor and looked into the pit below. Flood combat forms were circling the floor beneath. Melanie practically carried Eric's semi-conscious form to the opening, and onto the remains of the roof.

She looked around and saw the ferocious hulk of the dark purple Phantom. "Scout team! Scout team, this is Black Ops 05 requesting immediate Evac. What is your status?"

"_We have just picked up the last of your team, we are now moving toward you."_

Melanie zoomed in and watched as the Mirrator'd twin blades cut down Flood combat forms that had climbed to the roof. Behind the large Elite ran corporal Hall and Jackson; firing their riffles to give Simyaldee cover as he raced toward the gravity lift. The trio made their way into the phantom, and it slowly turned toward them as its mounted plasma cannons fired into the nearly vast sea of combat forms on the street below. It stopped over Melanie's head and the gravity lift powered up.

"08, the parties over." Melanie stated as she felt the lift pulling her upward.

Mathew turned and jumped up to the roof. He then dived into the blue light with a heavy sight. "Man these parties are starting to get dull." They entered the hull of the ship and the phantom's engines powered to full, leaving the swarming Flood numbers littering the small town's streets. As the phantom flew out of view, the Flood slowly turned and continued their migration north.

Melanie aided Eric to a corner floor. All of his earlier wounds from the pelican crash had reopened, and several new wounds covered him. Blood was soaking into his uniform as Melanie examined him. She pulled her monitor from her hip pocket and plugged it into Eric's suit.

"Left leg broken, a concussion, internal bleedingâ€¦ what is it with you and getting massive injuries?" Melanie questioned.

Corporal Hall came closer and sat at their side. "That Spec Ops Elite said that we're heading toward Abu Simbel. It'll be about a forty five minute flight. Can he make it?"

"I don't know." Melanie stated as she examined Eric's wounds and began to fill them with Bio-foam. Normally he would have reacted to the pain, but Eric had passed out long ago.

The rest of the group sat along the side of the phantom's troop bay as the front door opened. Palab waddled into the bay and stood at Melanie's side. He inspected the site of his human friend and showed great concern.

"He okay?"

Melanie watched the monitor. "No, Palab. He's not okay." She sulked as she watched his heart rate begin to fluctuate. "He's far from okay." Normally Melanie would have been happy to see Palab, she found Grunts comical and oddly cute; as long as they weren't shooting at her.

Palab looked at Melanie and then stared at Eric's wounds. He then felt his arm itching again, and scratched the green skin on his arm. The skin was dry, but thankfully the wound was getting smaller. The Grunt King looked at the other humans, letting their appearance soak into his mind. Oddly enough, most humans looked the same, except for the Sergeant, his skin was dark and that made him easily recognizable. The humans looked mentally exhausted and surprisingly unemotional after being rescued from the clutches of the Flood.

"This your new pack?" Palab questioned to Melanie.

Melanie pressed her last bottle of bio-foam into Eric's leg and huffed. "For now. But once we arrive at Abu Simbel we'll be joining the defensive. We'll be fighting with you."

Palab liked the idea, but he knew that it wouldn't be the same without Sergeant Raynord. The human that had taken the Sangheili "Trials" with him was unconscious and on the verge of death. Palab looked at the palm of his hand and rubbed the scar that the Sangheili had given him. He and Eric had both taken the "Blood Oath"; vowing their lives to the pride of the Sangheili.

While it was still difficult for many Elites to understand that Palab was no ordinary Grunt, they never questioned the mark upon his palm. Palab looked at the gloved hand of Eric, knowing that beneath the glove was a mark just like his; proof of their brotherly bond to the Elites.

The door parted and Simyaldee walked toward the group. "If the Sergeant is wounded, which of you is in command?" He seemed unaffected by Eric's condition.

The Marines, Airman Tsueng, Corporal Hall and Mathew looked at Melanie. "I guess I am, Simyaldee."

"Good. Come with me." Simyaldee turned and walked back through the door.

"Do what you can, 08." Melanie stated as she walked away. She followed Simyaldee to a separate chamber and he motioned her to a nearby data console. "What is it?"

"The construct, I believe you called it, Siren." Simyaldee sighed. "However, she is not acting normal. We powered her down and thought it would be best to deliver it directly to the humans in Camp Eden. This was our priority mission from Admiral Hood. Also, I must know if the Honorable Human has been infected by the flood."

"No, his wounds are from an explosion and a building literally fell on top of him."

"Then the Flood did not infect him, good. However..." Simyaldee paused and looked at Melanie from the corner of his eyes. "We can stop at the Abu Simbel supply field in order to get the Sergeant immediate medical attention, however..." Simyaldee looked away.

Melanie pulled off her helmet and sighed as she brushed back her

hair. "However, he would get better aid at Camp Eden. And delivering Siren is top priority." Melanie sat down in a corner and thought. Stop at Abu Simbel and Eric could get immediate attention, though possibly die if they can not help him, or go to Camp Eden and risk him dieing in transport.

"The honorable human's life is worth saving, but if we stop at Abu Simbel, there is no guarantee that there will be adequate medical teams to help him. Going to Camp Eden will add more time to our travel."

"He's barely hanging onâ€¦ he may not make it to Camp Eden." She lowered her head and closed her eyes. "I â€¦ I can't let this dictate our actions at this point. And with his injuries, he'll need more than a platoon medic to fix him up." She looked up into the massive structure of the Elite.

Simyaldee was the Mirrator Second in command. His armor was marked with countless scratches from past battles. Melanie found it hard to believe that he could be hit by normal weapons; she had seen him fight and knew that he was almost untouchable on the battlefield.

With a heavy head she stood up and gave her decision. "We have little choice. We have to go to Camp Eden."

Simyaldee whispered into his communicator. "Lieutenant Gridolee, tell the pilot to make best speed to Camp Eden. Notify the Camp Defense zones that we are making our approach."

"_Understood._"

Simyaldee looked down at Melanie and nodded his head. "You made the correct decision. If you had decided to stop at Abu Simbel, I would have been forced to tell you no."

Shocked Melanie questioned. "Then why did you ask me?"

"Because if the honorable human dies you will be left in command of his team, and I needed to know if you were worthy enough to fill his shoes." Simyaldee stepped back. "In leadership, you must think of the big picture. This is something that Sergeant Raynord was aware of; I could tell during his combat orders. He knew the risk of putting lives on the line, but he did it without fail. And you must learn to accept that. After we deliver the Construct, our primary mission will be to protect Camp Eden."

"Right." Melanie sighed. "You don't have to lecture me." She looked to the data module and examined it. "You said Siren was acting strange. Is Cortana in here as well?"

"Yes, both constructs are confirmed, yet their words are strange."

"They seemed fine before we abandoned ship." Melanie looked at the data module and pondered what was going on as the Phantom quickly sailed over the region toward Camp Eden. She walked back to the main bay and sat at Eric's side. She decided to tell the group that they were headed for Camp Eden, a further journey but the best bet to save Eric. They didn't question her words, but they all knew it was going

to be risky. Melanie placed her helmet at her side and pulled her flask from her pocket. She rubbed the engraving again, "Do or Die" she whispered to herself. She pulled open the top and began to take a sip, but suddenly remembered that it was empty.

"Damn, I need a drink."

**To be continued...**

* * *

>Notes: As always, thanks for reading. Comments always welcome.
 soulguard**_**
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6. Family Matters

**Level 6: Family Matters **

Camp Eden

> The Box / Military Sector Alpha
> Central Egypt
 November 2, 2552

Rose pulled up her welding mask and sat back from the table. She tossed her arms into the air and stretched. She was covered in grime and sweat; the side effect of being miles underground and in an underdeveloped room. ONI neglected to inform Rose that they chose not to install Air Conditioning or adequate lighting in the Box in order to 'preserve' its contents.

"Gibson." Rose stated as she returned to welding a circuit board.
"Time check."

A voice replied over the room's speaker system. "The time is now 0430 hours, Doctor. You have been working for nearly seventeen hours straight. You must rest. I can assign your current task to another member of your development team."

"I'm fine, Gibson." Rose smirked. She was content with what she was doing, happy to be doing her part to save humanity, and she knew that she couldn't afford to let time be wasted. Her current project was a terminal that would decrypt the software used within the Reclaimer armor, and give her more knowledge into the software of the Forerunners. "What's the status of the MJOLNIR gauntlets and leg units we shipped out two days ago?"

"Currently, Spartan 117 has received his enhancements, database, and new under armor layer. Spartan's 043, 058 and 104 received only the database enhancements prior to being sent to Cuba."

Rose sat up and pondered the location. "Cuba? Isn't there another Orbital Tether located there?"

"Yes. Your security clearance allows for me to tell you the status of their situation. The enemy has been using the Orbital Tether to transport weapons to and from the Earth's surface. The Spartans were sent to retake control of the station."

"Even though the Prophets want the Ark, I guess they still need to

deploy their forces all over the world." Rose smirked as she examined her latest circuit board.

"That information is not available." Gibson replied. A smart AI would have been able to carry a conversation, but Gibson was a generation behind.

Rose chuckled at the words. "What about the Black Ops?"

"The Black Ops mission was a failure. The _Rogue Fantasy_ was destroyed on October 31, 2552 at time index 1."

Rose jolted up from her work "What?"

"The Black Ops mission was a failure. The _Rogue Fantasy_ was destroyed at time index 1."

"What happened to the Black Ops, Gibson?" Rose angrily questioned the AI.

"Black Ops 05, 08 and 19 survived the destruction of the _Rogue Fantasy_. Black Ops 19 is currently completing surgery at Eden Medical facility 4114. Would you like to see the relative data?"

"No." Rose sat down as her mind became divided on her duty and her affections. She was grateful to hear that they were alive, but Eric's injuries sounded severe. She looked around the spacious interior of the Box and suddenly realized that she was alone. Only the flickering lights of the Tree of Life and the mysterious Reclaimer battle armor gave her company. She pushed away from the table and began to unbutton her dusty and sweaty jump suit. Because of the heat and humidity she wore very little clothing beneath the jumpsuit. Sweat stains lined her sport bra as she pulled her arms from the sleeves of her jumpsuit.

Rose let the upper section of her jumpsuit fall to her midriff as she tied it off around her waist. "Gibson, I will return in a few hours. Tell someone to finish working on the circuit for me, and I need it to be finished by the time I return."

"Yes Doctor. But Doctor, what time should I inform them of your return?"

Rose was losing her patience with the AI. "Damn it, I don't know! I'll be back sometime before midday."

"Yes Doctor. But Doctor, such a time frame is not sufficient for your demands. In order to complete the task before you return, you must notify the workers of a better time frame."

Rose walked to the door and waved for it to open, but Gibson would not let her pass. "Damn it, Gibson! Open the door!"

"Forgive me Doctor, but you must give me a time to relay to your team."

"1200 hours! Okay?"

"That is sufficient."

The door parted, and a flow of cool air brushed over her Rose as she stormed out. She quickly jogged through the cave site and climbed the metal stairs to the elevator. The door opened and she stepped inside with the three unknown soldiers. Wearing only a tied off jump suit and bra, Rose planted her hands to her hips and put her back to the soldiers. Rose was never shy about exposing herself in public.

"Where are you headed, Doctor Santos?" One of the mysterious soldiers questioned through his helmet's external speaker.

"A Spartan III that can speak? I'm shocked." Rose quickly returned. "Why are you asking?"

The Spartan III remained motionless as he answered. "Major Rawlings orders. You haven't left the box since your arrival, and she would like to be aware of all of your activities."

"I'll tell you, if you tell me about that armor you're wearing." Rose answered smugly.

A female voice sounded from one of the Spartan III's "She has clearance. She designed the MJOLNIR." She was young. Rose could tell by her voice that she was most likely still in her mid twenties.

Rose countered, "I was head of the MJOLNIR project, but I only designed the Gauntlets, internal circuits and HUD. I pulled together the designs and the diagrams, but I rarely touched any of the actual parts. In fact, my first time seeing the full armor was in Port Said."

"Still, you have clearance, ma'am." The female Spartan Replied.

The male added. "Semi-Powered Infiltration Armor, or SPI Armor for short. It is equipped with photo-reactive panels, ballistic gel layer, active HUD and motion sensors."

"SPI armor you say." Rose added as the elevator door opened. She stepped off and turned to the young soldiers. "I guess Colonel Ackerson found further funding for his project after all. I remember the details of the SPI program while I was putting together the team for the Mark VI. It was proposed as a cheap and â€|" Rose caught her tongue, as she looked at herself in the golden reflective armor of the SPI armor. They were kids, just like Eric, Kim and Melanie had been when they were pulled into the Black Ops program. The UNSC had dark secrets; the type of secrets that were never spoke of in public. "I'm headed to Eden, to visit a friend in the hospital. If the Major is looking for me, tell her I will return by noon."

"Yes ma'am." The elevator door closed and Rose quickly walked to the showers.

"I told them that the SPI Armor was a waste of time." She fumed. "Those poor kidsâ€| 'a cheap and disposable army'."

Rose was one of the many protestors of the SPI armor program, as it took more of her budget away from the MJOLNIR project. But also, she knew it had its limitations. She felt that if the battle armor

provided no additional protection then it was a considerable waste of time and resources. Being the head of the MJOLNIR project, she had gained many supporters, but even more enemies. However, what Rose was not aware of was that the SPI armor had already been in service since 2531, and stopping its production was not possible. Once the plans to create the Spartan III had been approved, there was no looking back. Eric and the Black Ops were a direct result of the first stage of the Spartan III research. Colonel Ackerson's research team boasted that for the price of one Mark V, they could build forty SPI armors. Yet Rose Protested that one Mark V could do the work of fifty Spartan IIIs wearing SPI Armor. Her view was understandable, but the ONI brass didn't see her terms. Simply put, SPI Armor could not protect a Spartan in a serious firefight against the Covenant.

Rose quickly walked toward the Section III bunks, removed her dirty jump suit, tossed it into a pile and walked into the co-ed military showers. The cold metal floor and open shower stalls was a huge contrast to Major Rawlings private quarters. Several other female officers were in the shower and they gave a solid nod as Rose entered. She replied and turned on the shower.

It was apparent to the other officers that Rose wasn't a soldier. They commented that Rose didn't fit the body structure of a grunt, and that 'desk jockeys' didn't use the showers in the barracks. It was at this point that the girls began mumbling that Rose was perhaps an ONI spook. They didn't know how close they were to the truth. Rose tried to ignore the young women's constant mumbling, but the echo in the shower made it easy for her to hear every word they were saying. She let them talk, and enjoyed the cleansing water while it lasted.

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Camp Eden Medical Facility // Civilian Refugee Camp
> Camp Eden
 Beneath Central Egypt
> November 2, 2552<p>

The hospital doors parted as Melanie and Mathew walked out. Melanie strode ahead and Mathew silently followed. They said nothing to each other, but knew that they wanted to. Eric would survive, that was all that mattered for now. Melanie patted the flask on her hip pocket, and was reassured that it had been filled by the ongoing 'celebration' she had just left. Above her head was the lighted interior of the massive cave ceiling. A few Pelican transports soared over the city, carrying supplies for the civilians and VIP personal. Camp Eden was always a paradise for the UNSC forces, but now it was a huge civilian refugee camp. Millions of survivors lined the city streets and wilderness beyond. It was hard to imagine that nearly all of humanities survivors had retreated to this one location, but it were only the lucky few who could afford to travel. Rumor floated amongst the military that bands of non-military combatants were still fighting against the Brutes in various locations all over the world.

Corporal Hall ran from the medical facility and raced up behind Melanie and Mathew. "Chief!" Melanie and Mathew turned as he approached. "I just wanted to thank you two again. You guys kept us alive; we should have died out there. I'm being assigned to the 501st platoon in a few hours, and before I ship off to the west, I wanted to say good luck."

"Give'em hell, Corporal." Mathew stated as he shook the man's hand.

"Where are the others?" Melanie questioned.

"They've all been reassigned to various platoons, except for Tsueng. He volunteered for a pelican shipment to that Spartan heading toward New Mombasa."

"The Master Chief." Melanie smiled as she lowered her head in thought. "He called us Spartans when we fought beside him."

Hall smiled. "Doesn't surprise me much, I've seen what you can do."

Overhead the roar of a phantom could be heard and the group looked upward. Mathew smiled, "There's our ride."

But Melanie turned and watched as a man in a naval uniform raced toward them as well. "He cleans up pretty good." She instantly recognized the clean shaven face of young Wesley Williams.

Wesley stopped and saluted firmly. "Chief, I have orders from Section III. They've finished analyzing Siren from the recovery mission, and they need Spartan 087. Major Rawlings demanded that she return to Camp Eden, butâ€¦ wellâ€¦ Spartan 087 says she will not abandon Abu Simbel."

"Kelly disobeyed a direct order?" Mathew replied.

Wesley sighed. "She's been acting weird since the moment she put on the Mark VI. According her record, and Doc Halsey, she's more in tune with the armor than any of the other Spartans."

Melanie looked at Wesley awkwardly. "You really are a spook, aren't you? Were you spying on us as well?"

Wesley smirked. "I'm not at liberty to say at the moment, Chief. But I can say that I've never lied to any of you." Wesley looked up as the Phantom powered on its gravity lift. He knew Gridolee was inside and instinctively unfastened his side arm. "We tried to contact you two via your com frequency, but you haven't turned on your radios. Your orders are to extract Spartan 087 and return her to ONI command on level 41."

"And if she says, no?" Melanie asked.

"She's a Spartan, she won't say no."

Melanie sighed and flipped up her face mask. "And if she says, no?" She questioned more forcefully, glaring into Wesley's eyes.

Wesley looked away nervously. "If she says no, then you have to convince her that she must come back. Orders are orders, so if you have to force herâ€¦ well." He understood how futile that sounded.

Mathew stepped forward. "Force a Spartan? Force a Spartan wearing MJOLNIR Mark VI battle armor. A Spartan that could actually kill

every last soldier in a battalion if she so pleased. You want us to force her?" Mathew lifted his mask and looked at Wesley curiously.

Simyaldee and Gridolee descended from the gravity lift of the Phantom, and Simyaldee addressed the humans. "Palab is still being examined by the human, Doctor Halsey. She will examine him further, but she seemed most concerned for his condition. We came to speak with the Honorable human, Sergeant Raynord. Is he well?"

Melanie nodded. "He was coming out of surgery when we left. We were headed back to the front lines to join your defensive. Your timing was perfect."

Wesley looked at Simyaldee as he ignored Gridolee completely, but never removed his hand from his side arm. "What happened to Palab?"

"He was infected by the Flood." Simyaldee replied, as he noticed that Wesley's hand was affixed to his weapon.

"But the cure should have prevented any affect of the Flood spores." Wesley pondered.

Simyaldee added. "The human Doctor Halsey is unsure of the cause, but the Flood spores are not dieing within his system. Nor are they spreading."

"This needs to be reported to command." Wesley whispered, but his words were heard by all.

Melanie gripped Wesley by the collar and pulled him close. "Doctor Halsey can handle it. If you tell Command or Section III, they'll kill Palab, and you know it." Corporal Hall stepped back in shock, knowing that the situation could get out of hand.

Wesley glared at Melanie's hand as it clung to his shirt. "Sorry Chief. It comes with the territory. I have to report this because Dr. Halsey sure as hell won't! We have to consider the safety of the civilian populace down here."

Simyaldee clinched his mandibles at the words. "I understand. To protect your civilians you must do what must be done. The human doctor has been most resourceful in the past and she will figure this out as well."

Wesley pushed Melanie's hand from his collar. "Not my problem. Chief, you have your orders. Simyaldee, shouldn't you be at the front line with your team?"

Simyaldee turned on his heel, ignoring the human's tone. "Very well. I will forgive your words because fear has consumed you."

Gridolee looked at Wesley but did not speak. He followed Simyaldee into the phantom's gravity lift and they waited for Mathew and Melanie.

"You little punk." Melanie said dryly as she pulled down her visor. "Have you forgotten what the Elites sacrificed to be here? They watched their home become obliterated by the Flood, and the last of

their race just left them hereâ€¦ maybe to die with us. You have no right to talk to them like that! I know Gridolee hurt youâ€¦ but still. We owe them."

Wesley looked at her sternly. "Did you forget that the Elite's killed your sister?"

Mathew gripped Melanie's hand before she could bring it up to punch Wesley. He then turned to Corporal Hall. "Tell 19 to get on his feet quick, we need him. Good luck to you on the western front." A quick salute and Corporal Hall raced back into the medical facility. Mathew pulled Melanie to the side and then turned toward Wesley. He also felt the urge to hit the young man, but there was no time to get into a heated debate. As long as Wesley branded the bars of an ONI officer, his orders were law. "We have our orders, Sir! Permission to disembark?"

Melanie wasn't so humble. "I swear to God, Wesley, you better get your head clear. Next time Mathew won't save you â€¦ Sir!" She hated this version of Wesley. Without Rose around he was more of a pain in the ass. Rose was his weakness, although he showed signs of disliking her, in secret he loved her deeply. But whenever she wasn't around, Wesley became a true ONI Section III operative once again.

Wesley clinched his jaw and nodded toward the two Black Ops. "Dismissed." Melanie and Mathew quickly boarded the phantom and they proceeded to soar toward the massive cave exit in the distance.

Wesley was a spook, a cloak and dagger operations specialist under the disguise of ONI Section III; the top secret projects division of the Office of Naval Intelligence. This was the group responsible for executing the Spartan Programs, and Project ORION. Before joining with the Black Ops and losing the crystal, Wesley was a young Section III rookie, and had been reassigned to Rose during her recruitment period to lead the MJOLNIR program. He shadowed her for many weeks, going everywhere she went in order to make sure she didn't reveal any information to potential spies. But Rose was everything that Section III needed to complete the Mark V and lead the Mark VI. It was at this point that Wesley's connections to Section III began to fade, but it was only externally.

Wesley watched as the Phantom flew off into the distance, his ordeal with the Elites, the Black Ops, and the Flood was finally over. He decided to embrace his duty as an operative, and do his job to the best of his ability.

He looked over his shoulder at the dusty metal walls of the medical facility. Lines of civilians sat in huddled shantytowns along the street. Water trucks slowly rolled through the 'town' passing out rations of water and food, as people nervously begged for more.

"This is nothing like Dorenth." Wesley snarled to himself. "The Elites didn't have a weapon buried beneath their planet. The Elites didn't have food and water rationing. They didn't have a centralized government attempting to deceive them and make them think that everything was going to be alright."

Rose quietly appeared and stood at Wesley's side. "You're right."

Wesley was startled at seeing her. "The Elites could survive on their own without the aid of others. We are far weaker than they are. They are natural hunters, and collected their own food from the numerous plants and animals that lived in their Inner Sanctum. But look at humanity. We're pathetic." She looked at Wesley and smiled. "We sit on the top of our food chain, yet while we are in this cave we complain about being hungry. We are surrounded by wild animals, dogs run up and down the streets, cats eat our scraps, but yet we complain that we are hungry. Birds fly over our heads, cattle graze a few miles beyond this city, and fish swim in the lakes to the North. But we say we are hungry."

"Rose?"

"Look around you Wesley." Rose sighed as she looked at the civilians sleeping in the streets, in cardboard boxes, empty ammo crates, and vehicles. "This is all that is left of humanity. The strong continue to fight, but the weak sit here and complain about being hungry and thirsty. The smart ones left the city to live in the forest, or near the lake, but the majority of us humans have gathered here hoping for handouts from the military. You hate the Elites and I can't blame you, Gridlee was wrong in his actions, but I admire them. They embraced the technology of the Covenant, but they have not forgotten the pride in their past. If we live through this, I'll be living in the forest and walking back and forth to the city in order to finish my work. We will need to eventually rebuild this 'alien' world."

Wesley was once again docile in Rose's presence. "We aren't that weak. The Forerunners thought we were strong enough to be the leaders of their military."

"No. They thought we were 'smart' enough to lead their forces." Rose commented. "Humanity is cunning, elusive, thinkers, and that is why we led the Forerunner military. If they wanted strength, they would have used the Brutes or the Elites—hell, even a Grunt is stronger than the average soldier. Sorry Wesley, humanity is quite sad without our mental capacity."

Wesley slipped his hands into his pocket. "Well if you like the Elites so much, why don't you live with them?"

Rose laughed. "I guess I struck a nerve." She looked at Wesley and smiled. "Have you been inside to see Eric?"

"No."

"Well, let's go."

"No. I have some work I need to do." Wesley began to walk away but paused. "You said you would rebuild this 'alien' world?"

"You know about the Box, right?" Rose questioned.

"Yeah. What of it?"

"There are fossils of Elites down there."

Wesley walked closer to Rose and glared at her deeply. "Who else have you told this?"

"No one. I'm not in the business of giving away secrets unless it's a crystal." Rose laughed.

Wesley sighed. "Keep everything you see in that box to yourself. Don't talk about anything you still haven't earned Major Rawlings' trust." Wesley turned and waved his farewell.

Rose said a soft goodbye to the young man and continued into the Medical Facility. She approached the front desk and began to speak but the receptionists cut her off.

"They are waiting for you on the third floor, Doctor Santos." The nurse then gave Rose a badge with a photo ID on it. "Follow the signs on the wall until you reach the Military ward. Someone at the military branch can assist you from there."

Rose clipped the ID to her shirt and proceeded to the military ward. After following the signs she arrived at a Military checkpoint. A guard asked her to have a seat and soon a naval officer approached.

"Doctor Santos, it's been a while." A younger woman stated as she extended her hand. She wore the uniform of a Naval Officer and the stripes of a Captain, but her age and rank didn't match. Rose recognized the woman as she struggled to recall her name.

"Captain Monroe?" Rose said as she took the captain's hand and gave it a soft shake. "It has been a while. I think we spoke only briefly on the Seed Ship."

"Yes." Monroe smiled. She had never fully looked at Roselyn Santos, and now she understood why there was such awkwardness around her. "You're not Eric's type." She laughed.

"Excuse me?" Rose sarcastically questioned.

Captain Monroe simply smiled. "It's something Kimberly Peters told me once. We were off duty, and she was drinking and she mentioned how Eric chased after you while you were in college. Whenever Kim asked Eric about you he would always say that 'you weren't his type.'" Monroe laughed. "Come on, he'll want to see you. He just came out of surgery."

"Shouldn't he be resting?" Rose questioned as she followed Monroe down the hall.

"You really are shy around him, aren't you?" Monroe smirked. "You know him better than that. Eric will be on his feet in no time." They turned a corner and entered a more secure wing of the Military Ward.

Monroe continued, "Kim was like a big sister to me, in fact all of the Black Ops are like my family; particularly Kim, Mel and Eric. Despite the fact that I am their C.O., we all worked together. Kim told me everything, and Mel usually filled in the blanks. But you, you were an enigma. Kim would say one thing while Mel would say another. Eric rarely mentioned your name well, until Kim died." Captain Monroe and Rose stopped at Eric's door. "Kim would say that

you were a fierce Lacrosse player, and that you had the eye of everyman on campus. But Eric was the only man that made you nervous."

"Kim and I shared a great year together as roommates, but then she followed Eric to war." Rose stood motionless. "I wasn't shy around Eric, I was distant because I knew how Kim felt about him."

"That was the piece that Kim never told me." Monroe smiled. "It doesn't matter now. Major Rawlings sent word a few minutes ago that you would be coming. Don't expect any privacy, Rose. Eric is a valuable asset to many people. You aren't the only one that's worried about him."

Monroe stepped forward and the door parted. The atmosphere inside the room was far from quiet and peaceful. Numerous officers, and soldiers littered the small room. In the center of the room lay Eric Raynord, bandaged heavily and with an Intravenous drip in his arm. Captain Monroe walked in and was greeted by a young male officer at the door.

"Hey Captain, where'd you go running off to?" The man laughed.

"I had to get more meat for the party." She smirked as she wrapped her arm around Rose's waist. She then looked at Rose and winked.

The young officer smiled at Rose. "Well hello, love. Were you on the ship with us?"

Monroe cut in, "She was, but she went ashore during the Camp Eden defense campaign. She missed the fun."

"Lucky for you, love." The officer stated as he tossed back a shot of liquor.

The color and smell of the strong alcohol swept across Rose's nose. "Scotch." She looked around the room and noticed that they were all drinking at six in the morning, with the exception of Doctor Carolyn Smith.

The oldest woman in the room, Doctor Smith, examined Eric from head to toe. Rose had never seen the woman before, but she knew who she was by reputation only. Melanie had told her about the Doctor that made the Black Ops and saved their lives, but she had never seen her before. Even in her mid sixties, Doctor Smith was a beautiful woman. Rose began to move toward the bed but Captain Monroe cut off her path.

"Here." Monroe gave Rose a shot glass of scotch. "Melanie said you'd like it. She just left for the front line a few minutes ago. You must have just missed her."

Rose smirked at the irony that Melanie left before she arrived. "What made her think that I would like Scotch?" Rose took the small glass.

"She said you helped finish off her last hint of Whisky. They're in the same family." Monroe smiled.

"Not really." Rose stated as she examined the liquor. "Scotch-Whisky

should never be connected to plain whisky. It's either Scotch-Whisky or just plain whisky. Besides that, aren't you all on duty? You shouldn't be drinking. And on top of that, it's too early to be drinking." Rose placed the small glass to her lips and let the bitter-sweet liquor race down her throat. The tingle burned up her nose, but she embraced it, letting the sensation fill her. Rose preferred the heavier burn of generic whisky, the cheap stuff that she drank often while in college to draw out her worries, but in her opinion Scotch was the better whisky; the difference was its Scottish roots.

Monroe cheered. "I won't comment on the irony of you drinking right after that statement. Besides, somewhere on this planet it is time to drink. Plus we are celebrating the lives of our fallen comrades, and us lucky few who survived."

"But, this is a hospital." Rose sighed. She quickly found that she was being passed another shot. As she gripped the glass she began to remember the parties of her college nights, and how shot after shot after shot kept coming her way; the next morning was usually painful.

"Well, if we're going to break the reg's we should do it in the most obvious of locations." Captain Megan Monroe was young for a navy captain. She had bad luck with her commanders in the past, which was the main reason Colonel Ackerson recruited her to lead the Black Ops. She was nineteen when she was first approached with the idea of being a Commander in ONI. Usually this meant being a pencil pusher for the higher ranks, but in Megan's case she was going to be given her own ship. Her youth and inexperience showed over the years, but over time she learned and adjusted thanks to Eric's mentoring. He was ten years older than her, and it was another reason why she respected him so much.

"You really are young spirited." Rose took the shot and waved off the offer for a third; the men seemed eager and excited to see her drink. "How old were you when you became Captain?"

Monroe downed her second drink. "I think it was about two years ago. It was thanks to Kim, really."

"To Kim!" A very intoxicated man shouted after overhearing the captain's words. Everyone raised a glass and took a drink.

Monroe continued. "Her recommendation to ONI earned me the promotion. We had just successfully tested the Rogue Fantasy's cloaking engine. We slipped past an entire Covenant fleet, right down the middle of their formation, undetected. It was the first test of the cloak." Monroe smiled as she thought about the memory. Obviously she had more memories involving the incident that she didn't want to share. She then looked at Rose with an awkward glance. The scotch was starting to take its toll. "Sergeant Raynord is waiting for you. Quit your staling!" With a quick nudge Rose stumbled past a few 'happy sailors' and stopped at Eric's bed side. Monroe had already gripped another shot, and was waving Rose away as if she were a bad puppy.

Rose looked down at Eric with an embarrassed gaze. "It looks like they're using your quiet time in order to have a party."

Eric mumbled. "That's because I can't order them to get out." He winced after attempting to laugh. Rose reached out, her heart filled with concern, but Doctor Smith placed a hand on Eric's chest to calm him.

"Eric, say the word and I'll kick them out for a little while." Doctor Smith mumbled. A few comments rumbled from the crowd and Captain Monroe clearly 'booed' out loud. Although the officers of the Rogue Fantasy were talking amongst themselves, they could still hear some of the conversation at Eric's bedside.

Eric patted Doctor Smith's hand. "Everyone in the room is the only family I have left, Doc. Let them be." Eric sighed.

"You see, that is why we love you man!" An officer near a window shouted. The atmosphere returned to its carefree nature.

Corporal Hall walked to Eric's bedside. "Sir, I wish I could stay, but I have to dispatch to the 501st. 05 says that you need to get on your feet, fast. They need you."

Doctor Smith cut in as memories of the 501st quickly appeared in her mind. "You'll be under Colonel Ackerson's command. Word of advice; ignore him. He's a prick, a desk jockey pushing for power. He wants to win this war just like the rest of us, but he'll do anything to achieve it as long as he gets recognized for it. If you happen to face him, agree with everything he says, and then report to Captain Brain Haden. He's the captain of the Inner Power. He's about the only man that Ackerson will honestly listen to."

Eric saluted loosely. "You heard the Doc. Watch your ass, Corporal."

"Sir, it has been an honor." Hall turned, took a shot glass from a soldier and held it high. "To 19!"

"To 19!" Everyone repeated as they tossed back the drink.

Rose watched this familiar display; how all of the soldiers that had survived the Rogue Fantasy's crash had gathered around Eric and were morning and celebrating. Eric always had a magnetic personality. People followed him no matter what. Even in college he was able to convince his closest friends to join the military and help protect their homes. He was a natural born leader, the type of man that anyone would follow and willingly respect. Rose knew the feelings all too well.

Though she chose not to follow him to war, Rose struggled hard against the decision to remain in college. A piece of her heart had left when Eric, Kimberly, and Melanie joined the UNSC, but she made a conscious decision. She could still visually recall the day she found out Eric and the others were dropping out of school to join the military. She could still feel her heart sinking as she raced across campus to say goodbye to Kim and Eric. She could remember her frustration of fighting through the crowd of sports reporters, which had blocked her path to the campus tram station and prevented her from saying her farewell.

Fate brought Eric back to Rose, yet at the cost of Kimberly's life.

Rose watched as Eric talked softly to the Doctor, they had known each other for well over fifteen years, and talked on a level that Rose knew she couldn't understand. Rose sat silently at Eric's side, listening to the happy comrades gossiping around her. This was Eric's family, the soldiers he had been fighting with for all of these years. She looked around at all the inebriated faces and smiled softly. It was at this point that she realized she was holding Eric's left hand. She nervously looked downward at her hand, and felt the lock of her fingers within his. She became nervous. How long had she been unconsciously holding his hand?

Rose looked around the room again to see if anyone had noticed, or cared. Eric did not seem phased by it, as he continued to talk with Doctor Smith. The other officers in the room continued to talk and drink, occasionally looking toward Eric, but not making a fuss. Was this okay? Kimberly was their leader, the Black Operation's Senior Chief Petty Officer, and their friend. Clearly they all noticed that she was holding his hand, a sign of replacing Kim, but they didn't care.

Rose lowered her head, and focused on Eric's hand. It was scarred badly from the surgery that made him into a Spartan. She rubbed her finger over the scars, gently messaging the wound. Eric rolled his head over and smiled toward her, Rose softly returned the gesture, and Eric returned to his conversation with Doctor Smith.

Apparently it was alright for her to hold his hand. But was it really okay to be trudging over Kimberly's grave?

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Troop Supply Territory

> Camp Eden Civilian Defense Net
 Abu Simbel, Egypt

> November 2, 2552<p>

The sun burned brilliantly overhead as transport ships landed and took off from the nearby airfield of Abu Simbel. In the distance, nothing could be seen, but every Marine, Grunt and Elite knew what lay further to the South. The Flood would arrive, and it seemed that nothing could slow this particular wave down. Not even the mighty Nile River would slow their onslaught. Once the Flood crossed the River, they would literally be in Camp Eden's backyard.

Several Grunts sat in a circle, quietly resting as a red armored Elite paced around them. The Elite focused his attention toward the south, knowing that the creatures would come. He then looked to his left and watched as more humans began to rest in the shade of their vehicles. It was hot, and the sun was beating down on them, but the Elite was not going to become relaxed; the weak humans would not last a day under his command. The Elite then watched as the armored human, the Demon, sat atop the massive Scorpion Battle Tank. The Demon's gaze was like his, staring toward the south in anticipation of the coming battle. Clearly, the Demon was the only warrior in the human military.

Kelly sat motionless, her eyes focused on the southern plains beyond the mighty Nile River. Yet in her mind she replayed the events that had occurred a few moments before.

"_I gave you a direct order!"_ Major Rawlings had fumed over the line. _"Return to base, immediately!"_

"I can not obey that order, Major." Kelly calmly replied. "Defense of Abu Simbel is top priority. The Elite commander of this defensive has not returned, and I can not leave this defensive front without adequate seniority."

"_Kelly, this is bigger then you. Your mother understood, and even though she was reluctant to give you to me, she knew it could not be avoided. This is the future of humanity we are attempting to save."_

"From what I can tell of the situation, you are attempting to use me in order to further your own motivations. I'm a soldier defending the Earth from a threat. I remember the stories you told me when I was young, but I have come to the realization that I am nothing like the woman in your story. If I am forced to choose between the path she chose and the path of a Spartanâ€¦ I choose to be a Spartan, ma'am. My duty is to eliminate this threat and lead my unit. You trained me, made me, and gave me the tools to be a Spartan, not a Reclaimer. You should know this."

"_You aren't listening."_ Major Rawlings sighed heavily. _"You are the last of us who is able toâ€¦!"_

"Major, the com channels should not be used for personal chatter. If I survive this defensive we can talk when I return." Kelly cut the line, losing her patience and tolerance for Major Rawlings lack of understanding what she is forced to decide. Her constant spats about the Ark, the Crystal, the Reclaimers, and humanity. Kelly only wanted to focus on the now, her duty. Humanity had to come first, and right now the only humans she cared about were the ones standing at her side on the front line of Abu Simbel.

She understood what the Major wanted. Kelly remembered the story of Elena, 'The Guardian of the Luminous Key', and what it meant. It was a story which had been passed down for centuries throughout her family, and it was clear that it was more then just a story; it was history. Kelly's heart grew even heavier with this burden. She was no longer a simple soldier, created to be the most powerful weapon against the Covenant, she was the last of an ancient clan whose sole duty was to protect a powerful ship buried underground. A ship that recreated humanity and controls the most powerful weapons system the universe has ever seen, Halo. And according to the history of her family, it was time for her to defend and use it. She was being called to activate Halo and fulfill her duty to the universe.

The red armored Elite approached Kelly's side. "Spartan, do you feel the approach of the parasites?"

Kelly stayed poised but replied. "I do. But there is something else that is troubling me. Where are the Brutes?"

"They are with the Prophets, attacking the human defenses around the Ark."

"Not entirely. There are scattered reports of Brute sightings all around the world, and several supply transports have been shot down recently."

"Lieutenant Simyaldee will return shortly. He will have more information with him."

Kelly stood from the top of the Scorpion and jumped down to the Elite's side. "I understand he's your superior, but he may not have any additional information. The Brutes must have been aware that the Flood are still coming toward us. Strategically, they should take advantage of this."

"The Jiralhanae are many things, but strategists, they are not." The Elite replied.

Kelly returned her gaze to the distance. "Yeah, but they aren't the ones running the show. Truth is. And that's what has me concerned."

A marine jumped from the shade and called out to Kelly. "Sir, Juggernaut is on the box! It's urgent!"

Kelly walked toward the marine. "Patch him in."

"_Chief?"_

"Go ahead Juggernaut, I'm here."

"_Sir, we can't get near the Flood for our bombing run. It's the Brutes... they have a line of Seraph interceptors blocking our path. I've lost â€| three birds already. Requesting backup." _A large explosion sounded in the background._ "Mayday, Eagle-109 is hitâ€| damn it! This is Eagle-109, we're going downâ€| all fighters break off and return to base! Get out of here! â€| "_

"Juggernaut?" Kelly shouted into her com. "Eagle-109 can you get clear of the Flood's path? Juggernaut?"

The marine pulled his hand from his helmet earpiece. "We lost him, sir. Juggernaut's gone." Another ally that had survived the mission on Dorenth had been killed. Juggernaut was a great pilot, but eventually everyone ran out of luck.

"Patch me into the fighter squadron." Kelly ordered to the marine. "All remaining fighters report to Zone 2 and standby. If the Brutes pursue you have permission to engage." Kelly then turned to the Elite. "Do you have any ships on standby?"

"Yes. Several Banshee pilots are ready to fight, but we do not have anything strong enough to compete with a Seraph squadron."

"Get your pilots in the air for a bombing run against the Flood. I'll send my Longsword fighters against the Brute's Seraphs."

"Understood." The Elite radioed his pilots.

Kelly changed frequencies. "HighCom, priority Beta. I repeat, HighCom priority Beta. This is Spartan 087, requesting command override for Longsword Squadron operating under Echo-109, call sign Juggernaut."

A male voice replied over the com. "_Override accepted Spartan 087. Status." _

"Echo-109 has been shot down. Longsword Squadron is in full retreat from Flood bombing run. The Flood is under possible Brute protection. Requesting that the remainder of our Longswords engage Brute seraph squadron, while Elite support attempts a bombing run on the Flood."

"_Stand by 087." _ There was a long pause over the com. "_Negative 087. I repeat, that is a negative. The Longswords will be rerouted to provide air support over Abu Simbel â€|"_

"Sir?" Kelly fumed over the line. "With respect, sir, that would be letting the Flood get too close. Surely Fleet understands thatâ€|"

"_087, Abu Simbel is not the last line of Defense for Camp Eden. We are well aware that there is still two hundred kilometers between you and Camp Eden. We can not allow the Elites to split their forces to attempt a futile bombing run." _

"Sir, we are trying to stop the Flood from reaching our last supply station!" Kelly's frustration was growing drastically. "And this is a clear sign that this is a Brute controlled wave of Flood. They are using the Flood as a shield to mask a later advance. If we loose position hereâ€|"

"_087, our Longsword fighters will be on standby to provide air support of Abu Simbel defensive. Do not use Elite support. I repeat, do not use Elite air support. Focus all of your troops to possible ground engagement. HighCom out." _

The line cut and Kelly held her anger behind her tongue. "Cancel your last order."

The red armored Elite turned. "The squadron is ready, the plan is worthy, why should we cancel?"

"I have my orders." Kelly silently replied. "We are to hold here and prepare for ground engagement." Kelly knew what this was really about. The Major was forcing her hand and Fleet HighCom was not happy about having aid from the Elite forces. Hatred was still running deep between the two forces, something she completely understood.

The Elite tilted his head in confusion. "But the Jiralhanae will be providing air support for the Flood."

"I know."

The marine spoke, "Sir, doesn't HighCom know that this is a trap?"

Kelly stood at the Scorpion's side and gazed into the distance. "We can't worry about that. After the Flood cross the river, they will hit us first, with the Brutes engaging from overhead. If we survive the Flood's initial charge, we'll only be hit by another Brute ground assault." She zoomed further into the distance and focused on the edge of the massive Nile River crossing. She had blown up the bridges hours ago, but now she was thinking of another strategy.

The red elite stood at Kelly and the marine's side. "It would seem that your leaders do not clearly understand this situation. Or, they do not want our aid."

"That's the polite way of putting it." Kelly mumbled. Kelly had seen the Elites fight and she had watched as the Elite lead Covenant overwhelmed her fellow Spartans. She hated them, but for now they stood by her side and she would work with them until the flood and the Brutes were dealt with. She knew that the Elites didn't respect humanity, they considered humanity 'weak', but none of them had a choice in the matter at this point. Humanity and the Elites would need to work together, and look beyond the thirty years of hatred that clung to their hearts. It would seem impossible, but it would have to be done.

After studying the terrain once again, Kelly turned to the Elite. "This will have to be a dual sided battle. And we will have to concentrate all of our firepower at the river. This is the only shot we'll get."

To be continuedâ€|

* * *

>Note: Those of you not familiar with the story "Guardian of the Luminous Key", you do not have to read it in order to understand what is going on in the future of this story. However, if you are interested, you can find the story on my homepage. Click on my name at the top of the page. Thanks for reading.

7. The Banks of Abu Simbel

Level 7: The Banks of Abu Simbel

Troop Supply Territory

> Camp Eden Civilian Defense Net
 Abu Simbel, Egypt
> November 2, 2552<p>

A lone phantom entered the airspace over the Abu Simbel airport. The mid morning sun reflected off of its armored hull as it slowly lowered to the dusty field below. Dozens of Banshee single passenger air assault crafts lined the field south of the airport, and the Phantom descended behind them.

Simyaldee and Gridolee were the first to exit, and they quickly trotted toward the deployed Banshee grounds. "Why are you at ready stations? Has there been further development?" Simyaldee questioned to the squadron leader. Soon Mathew and Melanie descended from the Phantom and waited as the pilot lowered a Specter from the rear of phantom.

An Elite in blue armor approached. "Lieutenant, sir. We were ordered to scramble a moment ago. But the human's ordered us to remain here. It was most unusual. We are now on standby."

Simyaldee nodded toward Gridolee and they hustled towards the powered up Specter. "The Unggoy packs shall remain here as an emergency precaution." Simyaldee stated in passing. Gridolee manned the

gunner's station while Simyaldee drove. Melanie and Mathew climbed onto the passenger's seats on either side. They sped across the dusty airport toward the southern station, where Kelly had positioned the majority of the Human and Elite forces. They could see that the defensives had been deployed successfully; several rows of soldiers and armament positioned across a thin line nearly two hundred yards in length.

Melanie powered on her com. "Chief, this is Black Ops 05. What's your twenty?"

"Copy." Kelly replied over the com. "Central bombardment location. Look for the heavy guns."

Melanie focused and her HUD zoomed into range. She could see the Spartan standing atop a Scorpion. At her side was a full deployment of long distance weapons; Wraith mortar tanks, Scorpion battle tanks, Warthog "Spits" and marines huffing RPGs.

"Copy your position." Melanie replied. "Where do you need us?"

"Is the second with you?" Kelly questioned, referring to Simyaldee.

"Yes sir."

"Patch him in." Kelly heard a quick pitch change on her frequency, but she maintained her glance on the forward battlefield. She eyed the edge of the river, ignoring the numerous Egyptian statues that lined the coast. She rolled her battalion of long range weapons past the temples of Ramses the II and positioned them one hundred yards off the coast of the Nile River; less than two miles from the Airport.

"I am here, Spartan." Simyaldee huffed over the transmission. "What has happened?"

"Our first attempt at a bombing attack on the Flood was a complete wash. We were intercepted by a Brute Seraph squadron. We lost several Longswords and any attempt at slowing the Floods advance. The Brutes are using the Flood as a means of weakening our defenses. They are driving them toward us like a stampeding herd."

"Damn." Simyaldee cursed with the often used human slur. "A clever tactic. This would explain why the Jiralhanae the Brutes, have been active in this area. We encountered many of them at the human ship crash site."

"Confirmed." Kelly sighed. That was all she really needed to know. This last Flood outbreak was indeed a Brute setup.

"I can vouch for that as well, Chief." Melanie added. "The Brutes were also stationed outside of Mukutan. We knew they were watching us the whole time, but we didn't understand why. We figured they knew that the Flood was coming, but if that is where this outbreak began, then we can almost guarantee that the Brutes set this up."

"But how?" Gridolee questioned. "The Flood cannot be controlled. Even the Heretics could not wield the Flood's power for themselves."

"For now, we don't need to worry about how." Kelly added to the conversation. "Simyaldee, I'm returning command to you, this was your base."

"Understood." Simyaldee stated as he stopped the Specter at the side of Kelly's tank. She jumped down and stood at Simyaldee's side. "What was your initial plan?"

Kelly looked out over the Nile River. "I just sent a spotter to the top of the temple. He'll keep watch for the Flood on the far side of the river. When they get in range we start firing. The trick is, the Brutes. When the Flood enter the river our fighters will engage the Brute Seraph squadron. Hopefully we can hold off the Brutes before the Flood cross the River."

Simyaldee turned and looked at the Temple of Ramses the II, and the spotter climbing to the top. "I see. This will work. We can not fight the Brute's and the Flood, however, the water will slow down the Floods advance, giving our aerial units the time to fight. When the parasites clear the water we crush them. They will no longer have the support of the Brutes."

"Couldn't have said it better myself." Kelly smirked. "But there is a problem with this plan."

Simyaldee huffed. "If our air combat fails, there will be no room for a strategic retreat. No matter. We will fight to the end." Simyaldee turned to Gridolee. "Contact the Banshee squadron and tell them to prepare for immediate dispatch." Simyaldee then turned to the Black Ops. "Once again we must fight together against the Parasites. Muster your human comrades and prepare a second line behind the front artillery. I suggest that your all terrain vehicles join you."

Melanie nodded. "I like the way you think. The Warthogs can zip in when the time comes to displace." Melanie nodded toward Mathew and the two Black Ops raced toward the marines and the 'hogs'.

Kelly spoke up. "I'm in touch with Fleet and HighCom. The Longswords are in range and waiting for the order to engage."

The red armored Elite that assisted Kelly grumbled at the words. "A pity they would not aid us earlier."

Everyone broke off into their lines as Kelly climbed back to the top of the Scorpion. She glared outward across the expanse of water and recalled the words of Major Rawlings. She had made the right choice to stay on the front, or so she had thought. Disobeying a direct order, even an order that she clearly saw as personal, was not acceptable. It went against everything Corporal Mendaz had taught her.

"John, did I make the right choice?" Kelly thought to herself. Her question was more self questioning then anything. John, Spartan 117, was her commanding officer. A man she saw as her friend and family; her brother. A piece of her wanted to feel that he would accept her decision to ignore Major Rawlings. But truthfully, she knew he wouldn't. John would have obeyed her order. If only someone else had made the call, if another officer in ONI had given the order she may have answered it, but the truth was Major Rawlings had unknown

motives. Kelly was not going to risk her unit's life on a legend.

"_Contactsâ€¦| holy Godâ€¦| there's millions of them!"_ A frantic voice cried out on the communicator.

Kelly looked up into the dust storm on the opposite side of the Nile. She zoomed in with her HUD and gasped at the site. The Flood numbered well beyond what she could visually comprehend. Monsters of all shapes and sizes, tentacles slashing from side to side, beasts with unidentifiable forms climbed over one another in anticipation of the fresh flesh ahead of them.

Kelly contacted the spotter. "The seraph squadron?"

"_No sign â€¦| nothing. The sky is clear."_

Kelly clinched her teeth. That was not a good sign. "All weaponsâ€¦| Fire!" The Brutes were most likely holding back, and letting the Flood be a diversion; they would try to flank her forces.

Fifteen Scorpion MBT's angled their canon barrels and fired across the river. Explosions dotted the front line of the charging Flood but the creatures continued to advance. The Scorpions fired again and again, turning the far side of the River into a wave of red and black dust.

Simyaldee raised his left hand and waved it sharply toward the approaching flood. Ten Wraith units unleashed their plasma mortars high into the air. The blue boiling masses arced and dropped upon the heads of the Flood in a magnificent explosion of blue fumes. The power of the Scorpions and the Wraiths made the opposite Nile beach glow bright orange and green as the two explosive charges combined.

Marines cheered and praised the onslaught, knowing that the Flood numbers would be greatly reduced, but Kelly knew that this was only the start.

"Where are you?" Kelly mumbled. She turned her eyes skyward, ignoring the constant mind numbing throb of the Scorpion beneath her feet. "Where are you, you Brute bastards?"

"Sir!" The marine driver of the Scorpion shouted. "The front line of Flood are getting closer to the river! I can't believe some of them are getting through!"

"Understood." Kelly knew that they would get through, but for now she had to worry about the other threat. She happened to look to her left and spotted Simyaldee calmly watching the Sky. She had a feeling he would be watching for the Brutes as well. For an Elite, Simyaldee had her respect. Kelly knew of his skill, she had fought beside him on the Seed Ship after the Elite Home World was destroyed. And as Second in command of the Mirrator, she knew he was perhaps the deadliest Elite she would ever see in combat. At least for now, he was on their side.

Simyaldee then sharply looked eastward and pointed to the sky.

Kelly spun and watched in horror as twenty Seraph fighters dotted the

sky, diving toward their line of Wraiths and Scorpions; it was bombing run.

Kelly opened her com as quickly as she could. "Seraphs at nine o'clock, high!"

"_Longswords inbound!_" Came the reply.

"Banshees scramble!" Gridolee roared.

"_On our way, Lieutenant!_" Came the reply.

It was a race against time. The Brute controlled Seraphs had a perfect angle on the line of humans and Elites. The Longswords and Banshee were in range, but would they intercept in time? No. The Brutes would bomb them and be on their way out of range before the Longswords and Banshee's could arrive.

Kelly had to time this perfectly. "Defensive measures, standby! Continue firing on the Flood!" All of the human forces knew what she meant, though they were still concerned about the approaching ships overhead. She waited, counting the seconds as the Brutes came to within weapons range. "Hold!" She shouted over the com, reassuring the marines not to power on their newly added defensive options. "Hold!" Her eyes grew wider as the first Seraph angled toward the line. Kelly could see the Seraph's weapons bay open as the first plasma charge sailed free from the its undercarriage.

"Deploy!" She shouted as she unclipped a grenade sized device from her belt. Down the line, hundreds of marines were doing the same. She pressed the red button on top of the small device and threw it into the hard sandy ground. A puff of energy sprang forth, and glowed around her and a portion of the Scorpion. An awkward discharge of sound bubbled throughout the air as hundreds of Marines and vehicles were wrapped in Bubble Shields.

"We only get one shot at this!" Kelly radioed to everyone. Simyaldee was surprised to see the unique shield units as several humans also deployed them around the Elite controlled Wraiths.

The first volley of plasma rained over the line of Bubble Shields, and from the Brute perspective it was a direct hit. Flames snapped into the air, explosions rolled across the line of human and Elite vehicles, but beneath the flames everyone was protected.

"I'll be damned. The bloody things worked!" Shouted a random marine as he and others happily cheered their success.

"Clever." Simyaldee said as he examined the bubble shields' interior.

Kelly radioed, "No time to cheer. Maintain fire!" The Wraiths and Scorpions continued to propel their arsenal through the shield at the charging Flood forms as they entered the Nile River. Soon the Bubble Shields faded and all eyes once again turned upward as the Brutes turned for another bombing run. The twenty Seraphs banked and rolled toward them again, but this time they were greeted by Fifteen UNSC Longsword interceptors. They streaked over Kelly's head, the roaring engines propelling them higher into the air to greet the approaching Brute advance.

Kelly's com burst with static_. "We have engaged the enemy units, Spartan 087. We'll show these monkeys why we flyboys rule the sky."_

"Roger that." Kelly sighed. They only had one shot at using the Bubble Shields, and that was it. The defensive units were new to the UNSC arsenal, and very limited. Thankfully she chose the best way to use them. "Black Ops, what's your status?"

"_Were fine, Chief."_ Melanie replied. _"The Brutes completely ignored the second line, and we could see the fireworks. What the hell were those shield things?"_

"The latest from the Section III R-&-D." Kelly sighed. "Stand by to engage with Warthog's."

"_Roger."_ Melanie replied over the com.

So far everything was going smoothly, but eventually the Flood would get close, and there would be chaos. She took the moment and opened a wide-com line to every Marine and Elite.

"We have no place to retreat too. Behind us are the people we have sworn to protect. If we fail, they will die. We can not turn our back on anyone. As instructed, this will be a two line defensive and you will only fall back when ordered. Hold this line!"

"OHH RAH!" Came and rolling reply from the marines.

With hundreds of metallic pings the marines switched off their safeties, pulled back hammers and slapped in fresh magazines. The marines pulled up to the front line and readied themselves as they looked down their respected barrels at the river's edge. While overhead, a massive aerial dogfight continued. Seraphs and Longswords rolled and banked as they attempted to subdue one another, while the slower Banshees assisted when they could. Kelly looked down the line of Marines and Elites. They were as ready as they would be. But she was already thinking of the next option. Their line wouldn't hold against the Floods tireless assault.

Kelly's internal speaker sparked. _"Not bad, Chief."_ Melanie added in typical Black Ops fashion. _"You gave me goose bumps."_

"_Goose bumps?"_ Mathew cut into the private channel. _"The Chief can give me goose bumps anytime she wanted to. There's something about a women in green battle armor."_

Kelly raised an eyebrow, "I can't believe Sergeant Raynord lets you talk like this. Cut the chatter, Spartans."

Melanie quickly returned. "_Roger that, Sir. That's how we cut the tension. Sorry."_

Tension. Kelly thought to herself and understood what Melanie meant. Unlike the other Spartans, Kelly had been flying around the galaxy with Doctor Halsey. And while the Doctor was strict, she allowed Kelly to talk more then she ever would have during a typical Spartan mission.

No matter how she looked at it, Kelly knew she was different then her remaining brothers and sisters; her adopted family. The awkward part was that she was becoming more and more like Spartan 051, Kurt. His tragic death in 2531 was something that Kelly and her other Spartan kin kept closely guarded in their hearts. Kurt was extremely sociable for a Spartan, even Doctor Halsey found him a bit to talkative at times, but his unique dynamic nature made him an important asset in the Spartan's 'family'. He gave them all a social dynamic that they otherwise needed. It was becoming clear to Kelly, that a bit of Kurt was beginning to show through herself.

Kelly tripped on her com. "I understand, 05. Every squad has its own dynamics. You may continue on your private frequency."

"_Sorry Chief, you're the leader of the human forces on this campaign. If you aren't with us, then we'll stick to protocol."

—

Kelly remained silent. She gripped her BR-55 rifle from her back and attached an M-90 in its place. She checked her automated ammo shells from her armor's belt clip and made sure the BR had a full magazine. She then jumped down from the top of the Scorpion and took a knee at the marines line; facing the water's edge. She scanned her active weapons inventory. Two M7 sub machines with three spare clips each, rested inside her thigh holsters. Two plasma and two fragmentation grenades rested in her belt holsters. Her trusty BR-55 was sat in her hand with four ammo magazines in her left belt storage. And magnetically attached to her back panel was the UNSC 'Elite killer', the M90 shotgun, with thirty extra rounds in her right belt storage. Every storage compartment on her armor was maxed out and bursting at the seams with ammo. She was ready.

Her motion tracker pinged.

"Hostile units detected!" Kelly roared over the com.

Simyaldee joined Kelly in the front, unclipped his dual energy swords and turned on his com. "All tank units begin to fall back to the second line while maintaining fire. Black Ops, prepare for repositioning on my order."

"_Roger that."_ The front line of Scorpions and Wraiths began to back away from the shore, but continued to fire until they were out of range. It was a bit unnerving for the marines to see the Tanks leaving them alone on the front, without them there was zero cover in the openness off the Nile River bank.

Simyaldee turned to Kelly. "Spartan, what is your name?" Kelly looked at him awkwardly. "I know this may seem sudden. But in Sangheili culture, a name means many things, and it is bound with honor."

She answered. "My name is Spartan 087â€|" She paused. "Kelly."

Simyaldee stated. "Well then, Kelly, let us decimate this Parasite infestation."

"I like the way you think." Kelly stated as the first Flood form rose from the water's depths.

Water dripped from the creature's form as it gargled and spat an angry cry. Its words were lost in any form of comprehension and swung it's tentacles in all directions. Another appeared behind it and another and another, soon the Nile's coast was swarming with Flood combat forms.

"Brothers, form up on me!" Simyaldee shouted to the Elites under his command. "Fire!" Plasma volleys ignited into the Flood numbers. Pink crystal shards from Needlers also darted across the air. The Flood were cut down in a rapid fashion, but they kept coming. The Flood stormed the beach with reckless determination. The marines fired controlled bursts into them, cutting more and more of them down. The wave of the Flood pushed forward, slowly cutting the distance between them.

One hundred yards turned into seventy five. But the Marines and Elites held.

Seventy five yards turned into fifty. But the Marines and the Elites gave it their all.

Fifty yards turned into twenty five. And the forces began to buckle.

Panic was filling the human lines as the Flood pressed toward them. Grenades were thrown in order to further hold the Flood's aggression. But they pushed forward without regard for their own fate. The Flood lines exploded, crumbled, and splattered but they continued to push forward.

Kelly felt it. The marines were loosing their calm. "Hold the line a little longer!"

She fired rapidly, switching magazines with unrivaled speed. Her Battle Rifle continuously barked its deadly payload with accurate results. By now, it was common knowledge on how to kill a Flood combat form, but hitting it was still difficult. Simyaldee stood at her side, powered on his blades and waited for them to get close. Gridolee stood at his commander's side and also powered on his dual blades. The Mirrator'd would not run from this menace, and neither was Kelly.

Spartan 087 stood. In her mind she had no where to go unless the Flood was stopped. She tossed her Battle Rifle, and pulled down her Shotgun. She pumped a round in the chamber and looked down the barrel. Her back was to an invisible wall, and there was no escape.

The marines were loosing their calm, but many were staying steady. Kelly knew that if one marine backed away, that would start a chain reaction and many more would succumb to their fear.

A flood jumped toward her and she pulled the trigger, blowing away the flood forms corpse. "Hold this line!" She shouted as she took one step forward.

Simyaldee roared a battle cry and lunged forward at the closest Flood form near to him. "Black Ops, now!" He shouted into his com.

Six Warthogs speed from around the large temple hillside of Abu

Simbel, dust was tossed from the massive wheels. The marines onboard cheered hysterically as they forced themselves to forget their fear. The six vehicles plowed into the Floods thicket, tossing corpses in to the air. The 'Spit' cannons and chain guns fired rapidly into the creatures as the drivers swerved wildly.

Kelly cut into her com. "Marines, fall back to the second line. Black Ops, steady the artillery for another hold!" Kelly stepped forward, joining Simyaldee and Gridolee in the midst of the Flood. Her M90 flared with successive discharges as the Warthogs drove in circles around them. More Elites raced into the thicket, not retreating with the human numbers.

"Fall back, brothers!" Simyaldee roared. "Stand with the humans and prepare for the second defensive!"

The Elites ignored his orders. "It is best to face this threat head on, then to turn our backs to it!" One red armored Elite roared. The Elite stampeded into the Flood advance as the marines ran.

Melanie zoomed into the battle and watched as Kelly gave it her all. "Chief, don't be a hero! The hogs will provide cover! Fall back to our position!" Melanie watched as the Marines ran toward her line. She stood and fired several rounds toward the trailing Flood combat forms. Some of the retreating marines weren't so lucky. Melanie watched as one poor soldier was impaled by a Flood tentacle and tossed to the ground in agony. The creature left the soldier alone just as several infection forms began to claw at his throat. Melanie did the only reasonable thing she could. She leveled her BR and put a round through the soldier head. His body would be consumed, but at least he wouldn't endure the torment of becoming a Flood host. His body began to rise and she tossed a plasma grenade to his rapidly decaying form.

Kelly's shotgun blazed in the chaos as the two Mirratord Elites held firm at her side. The Flood crumbled beneath their combined might. Simyaldee's blade swung the majestic motion of a river stream; steady and constant. While Gridolee still relied heavily upon his brute strength; lunging into the Flood and disemboweling them with powerful upward motions. The other Elites under Simyaldee's command slowly began to fall from the Flood's aggression, one by one they crumbled under overwhelming odds.

"Fall back!" Kelly shouted as she reloaded. She then began to step back while firing. Simyaldee and Gridolee followed, but they never turned their back to the enemy. Several Elite's joined them in the tactical retreat, firing as they slowly backed away. The Floods numbers where immense, but Kelly hoped that Black Ops 05 was able to get the second line ready.

Melanie watched as Kelly and the Elites began to back peddle toward her, she the looked into the massive Flood wave to see how many of her Warthogs were still engaged. "Hogs, fall back to second line. Hold the Flood as best you can and provide cover for the Elites!"

"_Roger that, ma'am!_"

Of the six warthogs that entered the flood wave, only two made it out. The hogs were blazing in flame and soaked in flood decay, but

they were still running hard. The drivers steered closer to Kelly and the Elites, and their gunner provided ample cover fire as they retreated.

Melanie watched as the Left and right flanks near Kelly began to swarm with Flood forms. "Rocket boys, left and right flanks! Fire!" Several volleys of RPG rounds streaked into the distance and slowed the Flood's advance.

"_Thanks for that!_" Kelly exhaled over the com link. She knew they were being flanked on both sides, but there was very little that she could do with the Flood pressing toward her face. "_Keep the pressure up! Move more firepower to the nine and six, and be ready for another swell of pressure."_"

"Already ahead of you!" Melanie added. "08, unleash hell!"

Mathew tapped the gunner and his several rounds of tank fire began to pour into the line of flood forms. They were firing to the sides of the Elites, making sure to give them plenty of clearance.

Kelly watched as sand and Flood decay rained from overhead, signaling that the artillery was in position. She turned on her heel, and broke into a full sprint to the second line. "Simyaldee fall back, double time!"

"Warriors, fall back to the second defensive!" Simyaldee roared to his kin. The remaining Elites retreated at full sprint. Being naturally faster than average humans, the Elite and Kelly were able to barely outpace the Flood's wild chase, but they managed to get clear enough for Melanie to unleash her second attack.

"Coverage team, fire!" Melanie yelled into her com. From atop the Temple of Abu Simbel, several Marines fired RPG rounds into the chasing pack of Flood combat forms, provide the Elites with plenty of room to escape. Yet the attack revealed to the Flood that there were humans on top of the massive statue. They quickly turned and began to climb to the top. "Coverage team, get out of there! There on to you!"

"Damn, we've been cut off! We'll try to hold here ma'am. Good luck to you all." The marine's transmission cut as Melanie continued to watch them fight off the Flood forms climbing toward them. Shotgun rounds flashed from the top of the temple mound as the Marines took their last stand against countless flood. They were finished, Melanie knew it, and there was nothing she could do to save them.

Simyaldee stopped at her side, breathing heavily. "Such is a command decisison. Do not dwell on them, their fate is no longer in your hands. You must focus ahead of you."

He was right. Melanie turned her attention away from the temple mound, knowing that eventually the Flood would consume the soldier she had sent up there. This was what it meant to be in charge and to make strategic decisions. She saved Kelly and few Elites, but sacrificed five marines. In terms of strategy, one Spartan was worth the loss of five marines.

Kelly took a knee at Melanie's side. "Good work. Check your gear and began to move the artillery back to a third position. We'll keep

falling back until we reach the Ariport."

Simyaldee radioed to the command center at Abu Simbel. "Elder, this is Lieutenant Simyaldee. Prepare the grunts and your Mirratord Guards for a final defensive at southern Edge of the Air port. We will hold them as best we can. Stand by for further orders."

Kelly couldn't help but overhear. "There's more Mirratord with you?"

"Yes, protecting the Elder stationed at the Base. He chose to stay behind instead of fleeing with the other Elders upon the Seed Ship."

"I think our chances just went up a little." Kelly smirked as she readied her Shotgun.

Melanie chimed in. "A third line is set, Chief. I'm falling back to set them up."

"Confirmed, use the high ground as best you can." Kelly zoomed in as the Flood once again sprinted through the steady down pour of artillery. "And set up a mine field one mile back. If we make it that far, that should give us time to set up our last stand at the airfield."

Melanie grinned from ear to ear. "One Lotus patch coming up. I think I'll use a triangle grid this time. I haven't done one of those in a long time." Melanie stood and sprinted at full speed to the established third line.

Kelly watched as she went and was amazed at her land speed. "You Black Ops really are Spartans, aren't you?"

"_You got that right, Chief."_ Melanie huffed as she sprinted. _"When we finish with the Flood, I'll tell you all about it."_

- - - - -

Eden Medical Facility // Civilian Refugee Camp
> Central Egypt
 November 2, 2552

"_I repeat, Abu Simbel is under attack. All UNSC Personal are to report to duty stations immediately." _

The broadcast sounded over the speakers of the Military ward of the hospital, and the affect it had was spontaneous. The medical facility quickly filled with activity as marines and naval officers began to scramble. Those who were visiting wounded friends or having minor injuries checked, quickly began to exit the facility.

In Eric's recovery room the situation was the same. "Alright people, let's move." Captain Monroe shouted to her crew. She began to pass out small pills which would alleviate the symptoms of being intoxicated, yet they would all feel hung-over for a few hours; the pill would only help them maintain their focus. Monroe watched as her crew exited the room, and she turned to Eric one last time. "We'll be waiting for you." She saluted and walked out the door.

Eric sighed and glared into the ceiling. "I hate this."

Rose smiled. "I can imagine." Her words reflected on her inability to help fight. But she held her peace and leaned closer to Eric. She gripped his hands one last time and leaned in to kiss him. "I can't fight this war your way, Eric. I'm not a soldier, and no matter how I lie to myself, I'll never get use to it. I tried it your way, but I'm much more suited to doing this my way."

After the kiss Eric squeezed her hand tightly. "What have you been up to the last few days?" He questioned, knowing that Rose was hinting toward something more.

"I've been working with ONI Section III's R&D teams on unlocking the mysteries of the Reclaimer Armor. Based on your security clearance, I'm sure you know what I'm talking about."

Eric nodded. "Yeah, beneath Camp Eden."

"It would appear that Section III did a lot of research into who would be utilized in the ORION Project. The super soldier Gene is dormant in nearly all of humanity except for roughly .09 percent. These humans were selected amongst volunteers of the Military when the ORION Project first began."

Eric raised a finger. "Wait." He then turned to Carolyn Smith. "Doc, I need you to come talk with us for a moment." Rose seemed confused. Eric eased her nerves by adding, "IDoctor Smith has studied the ORION Project for the past seventeen years."

Carolyn Smith sat beside Rose. "He's right. I studied the notes left by Section III scientists and Doctor Halsey in order to help make faster Spartans." She sulked. The memories of the crimes she committed still haunted her.

Rose nodded and continued. "From what I found out from Major Rawlings notes, it confirmed everything that the Seed Ship's main computer said. Humanity was genetically enhanced, but the gene became dormant over time and eventually evolution. The ORION Project was a test to reactivate the Gene. Spartans are the result of this. Major Rawlings is a Spartan I, including several other members of the UNSC."

"Rawlings?" Carolyn oddly questioned. "But her file were deleted."

"Deleted." Rose added. "I know. She only has one copy of her original file. It is kept in her desk and locked at all times. Her file on the UNSC registry was deleted to protect her past."

Eric questioned, "How do you know that?"

"She showed it to me." Rose sighed. "She knew that I would need a blood sample in order to open the Reclaimer armor."

"What?" Carolyn cut in once again. "Rose, you have to back up. Explain this to me."

Rose cleared her throat. "When I first began to experiment on the Reclaimer armor beneath Camp Eden, I discovered that the suit responded only to a unique genetic code. Without this code, the armor

was dormant. So I ignored the interior of the Armor and focused on external research. This allowed me time to finish a few Mark VI upgrades. After a day of work Major Rawlings gave me an old paper file, it wasn't in digital format, along with a vile of blood. She told me that everything I needed in order to open the armor was in that folder. She was right, the blood instantly charged the armor's systems, but the servos were burned out."

"Amazing." Doctor Smith eagerly listened. "Her blood contained the genetic marker, the code to power the suit."

"Right." Rose continued. "But something was odd. The Reclaimer Armor, and thusly the Mark V and VI, were based on humans with the Super Soldier Gene." Rose continued. "Yet humanity had become too evolved, and the gene lay dormant. ONI had to do research in order to awaken the Super Soldier Gene."

Eric added. "So they created the ORION Project to study people and find a way to reactivate the gene."

Rose agreed. "But like I said, something is odd about this. Major Rawlings wouldn't let me draw more blood from her to do further tests. She told me to do what I could with what I had. And that got me thinkingâ€¦ if studying the suit is so critical, you would think that the Major would be eager to give as much blood as was necessary, but she seemed almost irritated that I need more. I don't think it was her blood in that vile. Her name was on it, but I think it was a cover up for whom ever it really belonged to."

Carolyn lowered her head and sighed deeply. "I think I know who it is." Eric and Rose glared at her deeply, awaiting the information. "The Orion Project contains some fairly interesting information about 'Human Physical Structure and Experimentation.' It contains documents dating as far back as World War II Nazi research and World War III Tzu Fein research. Mind you, these were some of the most twisted human research programs ever documented. During my studies of Doctor Halsey's research on the Spartan II's, she noted several things. There were three soldiers who showed an almost immunity to the Catalytic thyroid implant. And of these three soldiers, two of them only needed sixty percent of the full Muscular Enhancement dosages. They showed an immediate reaction to the injection, as if it weren't needed. These two Spartans were 117 and 087."

"John and Kelly." Eric stated.

Doctor Smith looked up. "And of those two, only one of them had their pre-Spartan training file deleted; Kelly. John's family background, upbringing, home planet, and doctor records are on file. Kelly's file has been completely erased prior to her training. Also, I found it interesting that Kelly's family was not given a certification of death, like the other Spartans."

"Certificate of Death?" Rose questioned.

Eric added. "The Spartan Program used kidnapped children, not volunteers. They were replaced by flash clones which eventually died of selected organ failures. This way, the families would not go looking for their children."

Rose gasped, "That's terrible."

"Do you think John and Kelly know what they are?" Eric questioned. "The only reason we know anything about this is because of the Seed Ship."

Rose shook her head. "Kelly may know something, but I doubt how much of it she is aware of. But it makes sense, that Prophet clone we found, he said that Kelly looked a lot like the Reclaimer that piloted the Ark."

Eric leaned closer. "Mercy said that? Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I was there when Doctor Halsey gave her dissertation on the topic." Rose laughed.

"Then there is a connection between Kelly and the Ark." Eric added. "I knew several of the science teams that studied the Ark. They said that it wasn't complete. Something was missing. A few days later Major Rawlings brought in that crystal."

"You mean the crystal I gave to the Covenant?" Rose said nervously, recalling her past sin to humanity.

"At the time, they didn't know there was a connection between the Ark and the Halo'sâ€ but now we know they are connected."

"Oh hell." Rose sulked. "Now I understand why Rawlings doesn't like me." She looked at Eric and smiled. "Well, I thought you'd want to know about this. I'm working as hard as I can to improve the armor. Like I promisedâ€ I'm going to make weapons that will help us win this war."

Eric sat up from the bed and began to remove the I.V. drip from his arm. "Thanks for the info."

Rose stood and walked toward the door. "If I find out anything more, I'll let you know. I have to get back to the Section III before noon. Are youâ€ going to the front line now?" Eric simply smiled. Rose returned the smile and walked out of the room; she had to let Eric do what he needed to do.

Doctor Smith stood from Eric's bed side and checked his bandages once again. "You know I can't recommend you going back out now. You just finished surgery a few hours ago."

"My squad needs me." Eric stated as he stretched and examined his own motor functions. He felt a little awkward, but it wasn't anything he couldn't recover from.

"Eric." Doctor Smith leaned closer. "Fifteen years agoâ€ I â€" Eric looked at her curiously. "Your augmentation is based on cloned muscle tissue of the Spartan IIs. In order to save you from complete muscle failure, I had to synthetically transfuse all of your blood. It was the only way to save you back then. This prevented the muscle augmentation procedure from failing and killing you all. As you know, synthetic blood has its drawbacks, and that is why you lost so much of your strength. However, thanks to Doctor Halsey, your strength has been restored because of her anti-Flood treatment. The synthetic blood I used in you was based on Kelly's blood." Eric glared at the doctor.

Carolyn smiled awkwardly. "Your blood type matched Kelly's, so we used her as your template. So when the time came to transfuse you, we used Kelly's hemoglobin makeup. Each of the Black Ops was transfused with their corresponding Spartan II. Based on what we were just discussing, the same gene that makes Kelly a Reclaimer is also flowing through your blood. I can honestly say that there are now four Reclaimers amongst us. You, Kelly, John and Melanie."

Eric lowered his head and stared blankly at his new fatigues resting on the edge of the bed. "Don't repeat that information to anyone ever." He gripped his clothes and pulled them on.

"But this is a good thing." Carolyn added. "Isn't it?"

****To be continued****

8. Stand and Retreat

****Level 8: Stand and Retreat****

Camp Eden

> The Box / Military Sector Alpha

> Central Egypt
November 2, 2552

Rose exited the stairwell and walked into the bunks. She placed a hand to a locker and reached for a clean jumpsuit. It was great seeing Eric again, and even more heartwarming knowing that things between them had changed. Her earlier fears of stepping over Kim's grave had been calmed for the moment. Eric was accepting her, and oddly enough, she was accepting him. She smiled inwardly at the thoughts of being happy with the Eric after she pushed him away in college. She quickly pulled out the jumpsuit and began take off her clothes, but her hands began to nervously shake. She watched her hand and attempted to ignore it. She undressed and pulled on the suit as the door to the room opened. Rose turned to see who had entered but suddenly noticed that her vision was becoming increasingly blurry.

"What is that?" Rose fastened her last button as she watched two of the Spartan III close the door behind them. Her eyes grew heavy with every second and her knees began to give out. She looked at the Spartans oddly and struggled to remain conscious. She slowly crumbled forward and was caught by one of the Spartan III.

"Forgive us, ma'am." The female Spartan stated through her SPI Armor's external speaker. Rose lost consciousness in the female Spartan's arms. "We have our orders." Rose slipped into a deep sleep as the young female Spartan tossed Rose over her shoulder. "Begin venting the room. I'll carry her to the ship."

"Roger." Stated the other Spartan. He pressed a switch on the wall and fans began to vent the invisible sleeping gas from the room. The Spartan turned on his com. "B021, prep the ship for dust off in ten."

"_Roger. Watch your six down there. The Major has not confirmed our launch sequence yet."_ The third Spartan III signaled over the line.

"Understood." He returned as he followed the other Spartan III and Rose's unconscious form. They quickly made their way out of the Section III barracks unobstructed. As they exited the building they stopped near a parked warthog and quickly, yet gently, laid Rose in the back.

A burst of static sounded in the females Spartan's ear as she powered on the hog. "_B017 do you copy?" _ She recognized the voice.

"I copy Major."

"_Do you have Santos?"_

"Yes ma'am."

"_Good. Deliver her to the Pelican and stand by for your secondary objective."_

"Roger ma'am. Is Spartan 087 inbound?"

"_Negative, 017. She is disobeying orders. If the Black Ops can not retrieve her, you will have to pick her up on your way to Mombasa."_

"Understood ma'am." She turned off her com and turned to her partner. "You copy that?"

"I wonder what happened?" He replied. "A Spartan does not disobey orders."

"I don't care about that." She replied as she steered the Warthog toward the Camp Eden underground airfield. "This may delay our mission time if we have to wait. Soldiers are dieing in this war and we have to baby sit Doctor Santos."

"Ease up, Kate." He calmly replied. "We'll get into the action soon enough."

"_Dave is right, Kate."_ Replied the other Spartan over the com. "_We'll show everyone what we can do."_

"I know, Greg." Kate sighed to her Spartan III partners. "But you heard that report from Onyx. The rest of Beta Companyâ€¦ gone."

"We don't know that." Dave added sharply. "We lost communications before we could confirm anything. Don't jump to conclusions. Besides, Admiral Hood sent reinforcements; the other Spartans."

"Spartan II's, Dave!" Kate barked. "They don't value us. They should have sent usâ€¦"

"_They don't know about us."_ Greg replied over the line. "_Hood and the other brass do not have a clue that we exist, Kate, you know that. How can we be ordered into action, if they don't know we're here?"_

"Calm down guys." Dave interjected. "Unlike the rest of the world, we know what the Covenant wants, and we know how to stop them. Once the Major and Spartan 087 get to the Pelican, we'll head off to Mombasa

and save the world. Doctor Santos will setup that last of her enhancements on the armor for 087 and that will take care of everything. You'll see. It'll be that simple."

Greg added over the com channel. _"If it were that simple, don't you think the Major would have told us to simply ask Santos to come with usâ€| instead of kidnapping her? Sorry Dave, I don't share your clear view of this plan. Something isn't right about it."_

Silence followed as Kate powered the hog toward the Airfield. They approached the gate and Dave tossed a blanket over Rose. The guard looked at the two mysteriously armored soldiers and waved for them to stop.

"Who are you?" The guard nervously questioned as he looked at his reflection in Kate's golden mask.

"Airfield Permit number B-7411-7 Gamma." Kate stated the words firmly and said nothing more.

The guard keyed in the combination into the data pad. The screen on his pad flashed with instructions and he read them to himself. His eyes grew wider with every sentence.

The guard looked up nervously. "You can proceed directly to Airfield seven." The guard placed a bright yellow sticker on the hog's front window, a sign that they were clear to enter any section of the Airfield. Kate remained silent and sped into the airfield, leaving the guard questioning what he had just read.

Another guard approached. "Mate, you look like you just saw a ghost. Were they Spartans?"

"I think so. But they had clearance permission from Major Rawlings and ONI. Section III."

"What?" The other guard questioned in a shocked tone. "Section IIIâ€| what the hell is that?"

The guard replied. "Spooks, bro. Spooks. They don't exist." The two guards watched as the file on his data pad suddenly began to delete itself; erasing all traces of the Spartan III entrance into the airfield.

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Troop Supply Territory

> Camp Eden Civilian Defense Net
 Abu Simbel, Egypt
> November 2, 2552<p>

Fallen human and Elite soldiers littered the battlefield as Flood infection forms crawled atop their corpses. The bodies convulsed and stood to their shaky feet as the alien parasites took control of their lifeless forms. They knelt into the sand and picked up the weapons that had been dropped by the former hosts. With a blood curling gargle, a scream of hunger and rage, the new Flood combat forms charged toward the Allied defenses of Abu Simbel.

Kelly barked orders as the surviving Marines and Elites retreated to the third line. "Alpha, Beta and Charley teams, guard the left flank!

Delta teams maneuver to the right! Pull back the wounded!" An RPG zipped across the line, yet it was incoming. "RPG! Somebody take out those weapons!" Kelly gripped a BR-55 from a fallen marine and took aim at the closest charging flood. She side stepped as its lifeless form careened into her line. She put another round into the creature for safe measure and then turned back to the approaching horde.

Simyaldee cut into the line. "Gridolee, take a unit and dispose of those combat forms! Black Ops, reposition for covering fire! Wraith and tank units fall back to the Airfield and assume position with the Unggoy!"

Kelly cut in. "We'll give you as much time as we can, but you have to move quickly!" She stated to the retreating wraiths and scorpion tanks. Kelly's shield flashed as SMG rounds pinged against her. She let the rounds hit her and leveled her rifle. The Flood combat form was too far away for its sub-machinegun to be affective. She fired several bursts and toppled the creature easily.

Gridolee stood at the side of several blue armored warriors. "Aim for the parasite in their chests, brothers!" The Elites pulled down their Carbine projectile rifles and took aim on the flood forms carrying the RPGs. "Focus on the heavy weapon carries! They are the most dangerous!" Several rounds fired from the Elites weapons, filling the flood forms with numerous holes, but the Elites' accuracy were not up to the standards of the Mirrator. One Flood form stumbled backward yet took cover and was able to fire a single round. The RPG puffed from its holster and flared toward the allied line. Gridolee watched as it streaked through his team and into the mass of human marines behind him. The explosion was dull and full of white and red mist. The humans' screams were drowned out by the roar of constant gunfire along the defensive line. Gridolee snatched a carbine from one of his kin, took aim, and split the parasite's infection form perfectly. The combat form with the RPG crumbled to the ground, dropping the heavy weapon onto the sandy ground.

"Level the area with holy fire!" He ordered the Elites. They all tossed grenades into the pack of crumbled Flood forms, to ensure that they would not rise again. Gridolee raced back to the main line to see how much damage the RPG had caused. As he approached he could hear the screams of the wounded humans. The lucky ones died when the rocket impacted. The unlucky ones cried in agony from missing limbs and painful wounds.

"Damn it!" Kelly roared as she backed up to the crater of bloody sand. "Alpha team, shift to my six! Pull the survivors out of this hole and get them back to the Airfield!"

Simyaldee tossed several grenades into the Flood horde and looked over the scene of wounded humans. "Lieutenant, reposition your men to compensate for the wounded! Black Ops, stand at my side!"

Gridolee looked over the chaotic battlefield. The gargling roars from the flood, screams of fallen warriors, and the constant sound of swarming infection forms crawling toward them filled the air. This was not going to be an easy victory, and Gridolee knew it. He was given one simple task; to stop the five Combat forms from getting off a clean shot, yet he failed. There was a time when he rejoiced in the sight of human blood, but now they were his allies, and despite the

humans' flaws and weaknesses their fate was sealed by his mistake.

"I should have taken the shots myself." Gridolee mumbled.

Kelly heard the words in Sangheili tongue, but her language software easily translated. She turned toward him and grabbed his vest. "You were given an order, warrior! Get your men into position!" Kelly's grip shook him to his core. The power of the MJOLNIR Mark VI and Kelly's augmented strength was undeniably powerful.

Gridolee snapped to attention. "At once!" He waved for his unit to join him as Kelly sprinted to the left flank; the Flood had found a soft spot in the line and they were hammering the marines repeatedly.

Kelly dived into small outcropping and pulled down her shotgun. She loaded it with a full stock and primed a round into the chamber. "Status!"

"Corporal Malone is dead, ma'am!" A frantic Private muttered. "Those damn things are using small arms fire! We're pinned down and can't out flank them!"

Kelly examined the terrain and noticed that the Nile River curved North at their location, plus there was a substantial cliff that fell into the river. "We have a natural wall to our left! Muster your men, medium range weapons â€¦."

"My men?" The private questioned.

Kelly ignored him. "We'll displace to fifty yards east."

"But Chief, there's no cover!"

"Black Ops, status!"

"_It's getting hot, Chief, but we're holding."_

"Has Gridolee woken up yet?"

"_Yeah, he's throwing his muscle around as we speak."_

"I need you and 08 to meet me at the left flank. Double Time. Notify Simyaldee that you are relocating."

"_On our way." _

The com died and Kelly stood and fired into a pack of charging flood forms. Two dropped quickly but the others pressed forward. The Marines stood at her side and fired in succession, holding off the Flood charge for the moment.

Kelly knelt and reloaded. She watched as the flood patiently stood in the distance as they attempted to regroup for another charge. "Clever little bastards." She mumbled. Shuffling sand caught her attention and she watched as the two Black Ops raced toward her.

"ODSTs?" The Private at Kelly's side questioned. Not knowing what to think of the modified ODST armor of the Black Ops.

"Not even close." Melanie replied to the Private as she knelt on the line. "What's the plan, chief?"

"We have to keep the Flood away from the River." She stated calmly. "If they realize that the River flows north toward the Airfieldâ€¦"

"Damnâ€¦ they could catch us blind sided!" Mathew blurted out.

"The Flood attack en masse." Kelly added. "We give them enough bait and they'll charge. We'll be the bait and draw them away from the River. We'll focus on the combat forms with weapons. "

"Let's get some!" A soldier cheered.

"Advance and then retreat back to the main line!" Kelly stated as she darted toward the Flood mass. Several marines ran to her side, firing madly into the stunned Flood. Seventeen soldiers stood and dashed into the clearing, firing wildly into the Flood's numbers. The Black Ops quickly took aim on the Flood forms with weapons, they were a threat even at long range. Melanie's riffle barked repeatedly as she charged toward the edge of the Flood mass.

With their super athletic speed, Kelly and Melanie were the first to reach the Flood's numbers, stopping less than ten feet from the disfigured masses. Kelly dropped a grenade into the crowd and began to back peddle toward Simyaldee's central line. Melanie repeated the gesture.

The Flood took the bait.

"Retreat!" Kelly shouted over the team channel. The marines turned and began to flee, stopping periodically to fire. But Kelly and the Black Ops never turned their backs. Steadily they backed away in a hurried pace, firing with focus at anything that came too close. Kelly's shield's sparked several times from Flood fire, but the Black Ops quickly took the creatures down. Mathew grunted as an SMG round split the fabric of his thigh. Blood began to trickle, but he stayed focused and maintained fire.

Kelly heard him grunt. "Are you still mobile?"

"Roger. It just caught me by surprise."

"If we need to run, can you?" Melanie asked as she fired into the flood.

Mathew calmly replied. "At about eighty percent."

"Not good enough." Melanie sternly stated as she slapped in a fresh magazine. "Fall back with the marines, now. I'm not loosing you because of a flesh wound." Mathew gritted his teeth in frustration and pulled out two additional Assault rifle clips. He grabbed Melanie by her belt and put the two magazines in her ammo stock before he turned his back and limped away. He quickly joined the retreating Marines.

"_Spartan 087, Spartan 087! Do you copy?"_ The transmission was filled with panic. Kelly recognized that it was the voice of the

Lieutenant leading the Longsword squadron.

"I copy!" She quickly began to reply, but the frantic airmen cut her off.

"_Unknown Covenant Cruiser, inbound! I repeat, unknown classification inbound! There's too many Brute Seraphs to handle—we're out gunned up here! The Brutes are pushing us back!"_

Kelly looked upward as the dogfight raged on, and she noticed that the contrails for the Longswords were quickly being reduced. The Brute's were finally showing their muscle.

She lowered her eyes and continued to focus on the flood.
"Lieutenant, I need your best call on the situation up there." Kelly radioed back.

"_We can hold for another five minutes, tops. My men will fight to the end, unless you have a better idea. But that ship is launching countless Seraphs at us!"_

"Simyaldee, copy!" Kelly broadcasted.

"I see it!" Simyaldee replied. "The Brutes could decimate this entire area with one barrage from their plasma cannons. But that ship has yet to fire."

Kelly grabbed Melanie's shoulder in order to let Melanie know that she was lowering her weapon, in order to assess the situation. She quickly looked toward the Southern horizon and zoomed in. The Covenant ship slowly stalked closer. It was low to the ground and looked like a rolling mountain, but it was clearly a ship. Its silver streamlined hull reflecting the bright midday sun.

"What type of ship is that?" Kelly questioned over the com. Melanie continued to back peddle and fire, guiding Kelly's hand and telling her to move. Melanie was Kelly's guide for the brief moment that she needed to analyze the battle.

"That—" Simyaldee Paused as he glared at the ship closely. "... is a Jiralhanae assault carrier. Heavily armored and carrying a large amount of infantry. Each Fleet has one such ship. Truth must be seeking something from your civilian area if he would send this ship here. That would also explain why they have yet to bombard us. They indeed are looking for something."

Melanie cut into the line. "Last time I checked the Ark was about three thousand kilometers south of here." She fired more rounds and then added. "The just left Eden two three days ago, why come back?"

Simyaldee huffed over the lines. "This can only mean that Truth has taken full control of the Ark location. He has no need for additional troops. He sent them here to find something."

Kelly cut in. "If Truth has taken control of the Ark site— damn it."

Melanie quickly jumped into the conversation again as she dropped another depleted clip from her BR. "Whatever our next move is, do it

now. I'm on my last clip."

Kelly knew something was awkward about the ship. "It's not a standard Covenant Assault carrier. Weapons?" She questioned into the transmission. Dealing with the new incarnation of Brutes was going to become a brand new form of war. She pulled her hand down from Melanie shoulder, cupped her weapon and began to fire at the Flood once again. Melanie hopped back a few extra feet and began to fire with her standard side arm, after tossing her empty BR to the ground.

Simyaldee commented. "The ship has minimal external arsenal, standard Plasma weaponry, however it has double the amount of Low Orbit Insertion Pods. The Jiralhanae assault carrier can deploy four hundred ground infantry in one passing. It was designed primarily to deploy overwhelming ground troops and support."

Kelly added as she began to reload her weapon. "Why haven't we seen this before?"

"The Jiralhanae have never been fully utilized in the Covenant Armada until now. This ship and its armament are unique. This is the full arsenal of the Jiralhanae war tactics; overwhelming odds in order to overpower their opponents."

"I guess even the Forerunners used them as infantry." Melanie sighed. Thinking back to what she had learned about the various classes of soldiers used by the Forerunner's Empire. "Shit. We have no idea what to expect from a fully deployed Brute ground force, Chief. What's the call?" Melanie fired her magnum in a repetitive fashion, aiming solely at the Flood infection form inside the massive host bodies.

"For thirty years we've been fighting you." Kelly sternly added over the line. "And in all that time, the Brutes have been sitting and waiting; conserving their numbers and equipment? It seems like they pulled the wool over your eyes."

Simyaldee furiously glared at the distant ship. "The Brutes were scouts and scavengers, used only to gather the artifacts left behind by the Forerunners in their quadrant of the Galaxy. We would not allow them to fight at our side because of the sins they committed against our kin. We have been blinded for so long. Even the eyes of the Mirrator have been shielded from this. I knew their forces were large, but not of this magnitude." Simyaldee clinched the hilt of his twin blades. His eagerness to attack the Brutes held steady only by the distance between him and the approaching ship.

"How many soldiers can that ship carry?" Kelly questioned into Simyaldee's ears.

"Four thousand troops." Simyaldee replied.

Kelly switched channels. "Lieutenant. Return your squadron to Eden, refuel and stand by for orders from Fleet."

"_Roger that."

>

The Marines all looked upward as the fighter squadron of Longswords

and Banshees broke off from combat and began to retreat. They all questioned what was going on. They could not see the lurking ship in the distance.

"Simyaldee, I recommend we retreat?" Kelly sighed over the com.

Simyaldee lowered his head. "I was on the verge of making that decision as well."

Mathew cut in. "Retreat? Chief, what do you mean?"

"I mean, the Brutes have won." Kelly added as she turned to the marines. She changed her frequency to a wide channel. "Everyone, load up on the tanks and fall back to the Airfield for immediate extraction. 08, get the marines to the airfield, double time."

Simyaldee accessed his channel. "Elder, the Flood are in pursuit of our forces and a Jiralhanae assault carrier is on the way. We are retreating from the area. Tell the Unggoy to prepare a defensive stand until the human extraction teams arrive."

Kelly turned to Melanie. "The mine field?"

"Twenty yards behind the main line." Melanie fired her last round. "I'm out!"

"Move!" Kelly and Melanie turned and began a full sprint across the field. Marines began to fire passed them, giving them cover fire. "No time! Run!" Kelly screamed to the marines. The Marines stood and began to flee. Simyaldee held his line for a few additional seconds but then waved for his Elites to retreat. The Elites all turned and raced behind the humans, eventually passing them. Simyaldee backed peddled, waiting for the two humans to join him. He found it impressive that they alone were able to hold off an entire wave of Flood forms for nearly a minute.

Simyaldee joined them and began to flee. "You held the Flood long enough for your team to retreat. Impressive."

"I've dealt with the Flood enough to know what makes them tic." Melanie shouted. "Kill the gunners and the rest will become hesitant to attack."

Kelly, Melanie and Simyaldee sprinted through the mine field, kicking sand up at their heels. Behind them roared the flood, hundreds of gargling and knowledge hungry creatures that were eager to rip their bodies in half. Melanie slowed her pace, and began to unclip her trigger.

Simyaldee also began to slow in concern for the human, but Kelly eased his nerves. "She's got the detonator. Keep running." They crossed the field, but Melanie knew they needed more distance. The Lotus patch she setup would produce enough destructive yields to kill anything within a hundred feet; unlike the cluster of bombs that nearly killed Eric, this patch was more spread out.

Melanie watched her distance and then at one hundred yards she stopped, turned, and grinned. "Boom baby." She tripped the switch and

gleefully watched as several dozen lotus mines went active. A chain of puffs and echoes filled the area in a rapid succession of spats, as each mine exploded a tenth of a second after the next. The Flood were vaporized in a matter of seconds, as the gore of parts littered the sky and ground. Fragments rained downward as Melanie marveled at the carnage.

The dust settled, and beyond the mine field stood the surviving flood forms. Melanie smirked, but she knew she couldn't kill them all. She turned and began to run again as the Flood began to regroup and pursue. They had bought themselves more time, but that was all they hadâ€¦ time.

Kelly stopped as she jumped onto a tank and assisted Melanie onto its side. "Good job, that should slow them down a bit."

"Four minutes tops." Melanie replied.

"Fleet, this is Spartan 087 requesting immediate Evac of Abu Simbel Troop Supply territory." She banged on the tank, and the driver began to follow the retreating human and Elite forces toward the airfield.

"_087, the Elites are in command of that region, we can only pull out the human troops."_

Kelly froze. She clinched her fists and struggled to remain calm. "Sir, I am requesting immediate Evac of all support from Abu Simbel. Requesting any additional troop transports you can spare."

"_087, Fleet can not extract Elite forces. They are on their ownâ€¦"_

"Damn it, they are risking their lives as much as we are! Pull them out!" Kelly roared; her patients and discipline tossed to the wind.

The voice on the line changed. "_I never thought I'd hear a Spartan demand that we aid the Elites."_ The voice was unfamiliar to Kelly, but it was clearly a senior officer in the UNSC. "_You were given an order to return to Eden, and you ignored that order. Now, you're telling me that you we shouldn't leave the Elites behind? How many of the Elites standing beside you killed humans? How many of them still hold a grudge against us? Can you guarantee me that each of those Elites are trustworthy and not a spy for the Covenant?"_

"Sir, I need them if I am going to establish an offensive against the Brutes. They have an assault carrier inbound andâ€¦"

"_An offensive?"_ The man questioned. "_087, has it not occurred to you that we lost this battle three days ago? The moment Truth and that Forerunner ship entered Earth's atmosphere, it was game over. The Brutes occupy seventy five percent of the Earth's surface and we are on the retreat. Problem is we have no place to run to! Now, get your ass on a Pelican and fall back to Eden, as you were ordered. I am sending six Pelicansâ€¦ six! And they will be instructed to only extract human combatants and non-com. Any Elites that approach the Extraction LZ on the Northern edge of the Abu Simbel airport will be seen as a threat and eliminated. Do you understand my orders?"_

Kelly bit her lip. "Yes Sir."

"_ETA to Pelican extraction is Ten minutes."_ The man sternly stated. "_I drastically advise you not to be late. Fleet out."_ The signal cut and Kelly sat motionless.

She turned and looked over her shoulder at the group of nearly sixty Elites following behind the fleeing human forces. The part of Kelly that had been fighting the Elites for more than twenty five years demanded that she follow orders without question, yet she couldn't. Simyaldee sped up and approached the tank with his Specter.

"Did you hear?" She questioned to Simyaldee.

"Indeed." He calmly replied. "Do not fret over us. We have the means to defend ourselves. This union is built on unstable ground. Trust will take much time to earn."

"I did what I could." Kelly stated as she turned on her team channel to the Marines. "Evac in 9 minutes."

"Sir, may I add that I do not agree with this." Melanie sternly stated. "Fleet and HighCom do not understand the situation. I've fought by Simyaldee and Gridolee's side for almost three weeks now, and if he trusts the men under his command then so do I."

"We have our orders." After a quick junket to the airfield, Kelly watched as the Marines policed the wounded and double timed it the few hundred yards to the LZ. To the south of the Airfield, the Grunts were keeping the flood at bay with stationary plasma cannons and shield units. "Lieutenant Simyaldee, I have a request. Move your troops north, toward Camp Eden. I don't think you'll want to be here after we leave. I think they plan to level this area."

Melanie looked at Mathew. "They wouldn't."

"Yeah, they would." Mathew replied.

Melanie turned to Kelly. "Chief?"

"I could hear it in his voice. They plan to Nuke this site. It's the only option they have to slow down the Flood and the Brutes. Most of our forces are scattered across the globe and the fleet was gathered at Mombasa, but if they were defeated, then all we can do is protect what ground we have left."

"A Fury Tactical Nuke is clean." Melanie added. "But useless against a Covenant ship's shields. It's pointless."

Simyaldee huffed. "Give the enemy no ground to occupy. If you must retreat, leave it barren; standard operations that your forces have employed on countless worlds."

"When you're trapped in a corner, deploy your last resort." Melanie sulked.

The Spartans and marines gathered at the North end of the Airfield, while Simyaldee began to instruct the Grunts and the last of his Elites on the situation. Wraiths, specters, ghosts and Phantoms began

to be loaded as the Sangheili Defense Zone prepared to abandon their post, but several packs of Grunts continued to fire into the Flood, slowing them down as much as possible and giving the escaping units as much time as they could.

Kelly and the Black Ops watched as seven Pelicans quickly soared into the region. "Seven?" Kelly questioned to herself.

Six of the Pelican's landed at the LZ, but one Pelican drifted several yards away. The Marines quickly began to load the wounded and civilian workers into the six Pelicans as Kelly and the Black Ops approached the seventh. The ramp lowered and a figure in all Black ODST fatigues stepped down the ramp.

"19?" Melanie questioned.

"The one and only." He replied confidently. "I heard there was an extraction operation being launched to Abu Simbel, so I caught a ride." Eric tossed Melanie and Kelly fully loaded assault riffles and M90 shotguns.

"Good to see you on your feet, Sergeant, but you missed the fun." Kelly stated as she shook Eric's hand.

"Missed the action?" Eric questioned. "I don't think so. I see a Covenant Ship inbound and a few dozen Grunts fighting off the Flood. I think the battle is just getting started."

A lone grunt ran down the ramp behind Eric, sniffing the air as it came into view. "Me ready." Palab stated to the group.

"Palab!" Melanie excitedly stated. "Are you okay?"

"Me fine." He added as he climbed down the ramp. Kelly watched him as he looked into the distance at the line of fighting Grunts. She noticed that his wound had completely healed, and that his concern quickly turned to his grunts. "Me not like this. Me warriors too far from support units. Could be cut off if Parasite flanks them."

"You're right, we need to pull them out. But if HighCom drops a nuke on our heads?" Melanie questioned.

Eric rested the barrel of his battle riffle against his shoulder. "They will. They gave the deployment code to a Longsword just after we left the airfield. It's a standard Clean-Slate operation. We have five minutes to Evac before they drop the tactical nuke. I say we pull out the rest of Palab's Grunts and make a break for it."

Kelly smiled behind her face mask as she turned on an open com channel. "Simyaldee, things have changed."

"I'm sending the Elder and my ground troops to the North. What is your status?" Simyaldee questioned over the line.

"Palab and 19 just arrived, and it appears that we are going to disobey a direct order. First, we rescue the Grunts, and then we make our way north with your forces."

Simyaldee sped toward the last Pelican as the other six began to lift

off, carrying the last of the human forces back to Eden. At Simyaldee's side were several ghosts and specters, while the wraith units continued to move north at their best speeds.

Simyaldee dismounted his ghost and looked to the Grunt King. "Report, Sergeant."

Palab stood tall and gave Simyaldee his utmost attention. "Me okay. Human doctor say me can fight. Honorable human tell me what his kin plan to do here. Me think we should leave, but me not leave me Unngoy behind."

"Agreed." Simyaldee stated as he turned to his ghost units. "Make several speed passes through the Flood. Keep them distracted. Be careful and swift, we can not afford to loose any of you."

The Elite piloted ghosts powered up and accelerated toward the southern end of the airfield. Palab quickly mounted another ghost and the controls adjusted to his height. He could barely see over the forward panel, but that wasn't going to stop him from going to his Grunts' aid.

He gripped the helm, and throttled behind the Elites. "Me go as well."

Simyaldee radioed back. "I will assist the humans in pulling out the Grunts."

Palab sped toward the line of grunts and opened a team channel to his kin. "Everyone! We are retreating. The Elites will provide cover as you pull back! Get out of there, we don't have much time!" The barks over the channel registered quickly with the grunts under his command and they began to dismount their turrets. The grunts began to flee as the Elite ghost units plowed into the front lines of the Flood.

Palab quickly raced toward Migpap, his young disciple. "Fall back to the North end of the Airport."

"What about you?" Migpap shouted as he fired his needler into a charging combat form. The creature exploded from the overflow of embedded needler crystals and Migpap cheered as he reloaded the spent crystal rounds.

"You have your orders. Pull the rest of our troops out of here!" Palab accelerated and sped into the Flood along with the other Elites. Flood fragments scattered in all directions as he spun around for another pass. His forward cannons spat its constant poundage of superheated plasma as he plowed into several more. He had to be cautious, however. The Flood's jumping ability would make them dangerous at close range, and at any moment one could pounce on top of him. He was constantly changing course, and making sure that his ghost didn't fall apart from constantly running over the masses of Flood.

Simyaldee stood with Eric as the Pelican powered up. "How many can this vehicle carry?"

"We'll fit all of the Grunts." Eric stated as he patted the pilot on the shoulder. "We'll make them fit. Your ghost units can drive out of

here on their own, as well as the Specters. You will need to be at least two miles away when HighCom drops the nuke."

"Very well, Gridolee and I will assist in guarding the grunts retreat. I leave their evacuation to you." Simyaldee stepped from the Pelican ramp as he passed Melanie.

"19, we've cleared all ground forces and civilians." Melanie stated. "Also, the heavy weapons vehicles are clear of the blast radius. We have two minutes until the nuke is dropped."

"Good." Eric stated calmly.

"19. Are you sure you should be out here? It hasn't been long enough for your wounds to fully heal, andâ€¦"

Eric cut off her statement. "Prep the ramp, and man the turret. We're going to pick them up." Melanie nodded and pulled out the powerful swivel arm carrying the turret at the end of the bay. The Pelican rose and began to slowly drift toward the running grunts. Melanie counted forty of them and wondered if they could all really fit.

The pelican lowered to the ground and young Migpap waved the Grunts inside. "Let's go!" He shouted in Grunts speak. Quickly the bay of the pelican began to fill and the Grunts kept coming. "Get close, make more room!" Migpap shouted inside. The Grunts began to crawl on top of each other and an alarm sounded in the cockpit.

Eric watched the pilot turn the alarm off. "What was that?"

"Just the weight alarm. Not a problem." The pilot stated. "Are they onboard?"

Eric turned around and was greeted by the eyes of at least three grunts that were sitting in the cockpit. He couldn't see passed them as they were crawling on top of each other. "05, status."

Melanie pulled back the ammo loader on the chain gun and began to fire into a group of combat forms that came too close. "Almost ready! A few more and we can leave!" She fired over the Grunts heads and wiped the field of the combat forms that had come too close.

"Hurry!" Migpap shouted as two grunts tossed grenades at a combat form. The Grunts turned and waddled hurriedly into the pelican. "We ready!" Migpap said to Melanie.

Melanie raised the ramp a few degrees to help scope Migpap into the belly of the Pelican. "Go go go!" She shouted into her headset. The Pelican moaned as the engines powered to full. The pelican slowly lifted off and groaned as the ship's hull disagreed with the weight.

The pilot sighed, "Forty grunts equals the weight of one standard Scorpion MBT? Where's the math in that?" He questioned as he adjusted the engine's output to compensate for the weight.

Eric opened his transmission. "Simyaldee, Palab, we're clear! Evac now!"

9. Return of Sangheili Honor

****Level 9: Return of Sangheili Honor****

Abu Simbel Airfield, Egypt
> November 2, 2552<p>

A plume of superheated dust and matter, vaulted into the air as a bubble of over pressurized air swept across the region. In its wake was an ever expanding avalanche of rocks and dust. Anything in its path would be instantly vaporized, or crushed under the immense wave of debris. A Fury Tactical Nuke, though clean of radiation, was still a devastating weapon.

The earth rumbled as the ever expanding pressure rolled outward from the detonation point. Instantly the Flood winked out of existence, no longer a threat to humanity or the Brute occupants. The Brute ship rocked sideways as the powerful explosion washed over its shields, but those same shields also protected it, saving the thousands of Brute forces on board.

Yet on the ground, speeding toward the north, were seven ghosts and one specter. Racing ahead of the wave of destruction and attempting to avoid death. The weapon was released before they had expected, but none the less they retreated from the area with only a hairs breath of a chance to survive.

Palab's ghost quickly took the lead, his smaller frame provided a lighter weight on the ghost's engines and naturally made him faster than the Elites at his side. He looked into his rear, and watched as the sky flashed red, then orange and pink, before returning to what was considered a normal hue of yellow and blue. The plume of smoke was a clear sign that this was a bad place to be, and he quickly faced forward to make sure his path was clear.

Simyaldee's Specter trailed the pack. It was slower than the ghosts, but still putting up a decent amount of speed. At the gun turret stood the massive Elite, Gridolee. He hung for dear life, knowing that behind him was a storm of heat and debris. Together their chances of escaping were slim, and even though they had a two minute head start before the explosion occurred, neither of the Mirratord Warriors was sure if it was enough. The human weapon had a reputation of being effective.

Simyaldee turned on his team channel. "No matter what happens brothers, do not stop!" His voice echoed into the ears of all the Elites. The rumble of rocks and wind crept louder into Simyaldee's ear. He looked back, and showed no concern as a boulder the size of a wraith rolled behind him and was gaining at a faster pace, and it was consumed in a cloud of dust and sand. He looked up to Gridolee as the young Mirratord Warrior forcefully looked down to him from the gun turret. His eyes showed his nervousness, and Simyaldee sensed his fear, but no words could calm him.

Simyaldee faced forward held down the accelerator and closed his eyes, not in fear, but in thought. He could not outrun the boulder, and if he attempted to turn the Specter out of the boulder's path he would lose momentum. Simyaldee did not fear death. Death was inevitable, and any warrior accepted its prospect. It loomed in the face of anyone who lifted a weapon or stood on a battlefield. To die

in battle while defending what you believed in was a death of honor.

With his eyes closed, a distant memory flashed before him. A figure he had long considered gone from his conscious thought. Her scent filled his mind as if she sat at his side; a forgotten love. Simyaldee had embraced being a soldier, determined to lead the Mirratord and find the truth in the Prophets lies, but his determination had overshadowed his past. He had nearly forgotten her, and though she died many years ago, she remained his reason for leading the Mirratord.

Simyaldee opened his eyes and looked into the dusty sky. "Vasmeolaâ€|" The name escaped his mandibles with a soft mumbled that only his heart could hear. But soon the sound of metal churning in rocks filled his ears. The two warriors were tossed to the wind as a pulverizing amount of pressure swelled around them.

Simyaldee pulled his arms and legs inward, turning himself into a ball. He closed his eyes and struggled to hold himself as tightly as he could. He was caught in the wave of destruction, and the sound of rocks bouncing off of his enhanced Mirratord shields constantly filled his ears. He knew that Gridolee was out there going through the same ordeal, and his heart went out to the young warrior. It seemed as though he was being tossed around forever, but eventually he could no longer hear anything but a loud hum. Then there was no longer any pain or movement. Only silence filled the world.

The nothingness at the end of life.

Several hundred yards ahead of Simyaldee and Gridolee's resting spot, Palab plowed forward as the Elites at his side began to mutter over the channel.

"_We lost the Lieutenants!"_

"_By the blood of our ancestors, we will avenge them!"_

"_They shall not be forgotten!"_

Palab sat in his ghost and faced forward. The Mirratord second was gone, killed in an act of desperation by the very humans he had stayed behind to help protect. Was this betrayal? Did the humans do this on purpose? He looked back and watched as the sand began to slow, the rocks quickly vanished and the powerful wave of destruction was left behind. They had made it to the two mile border of the Nuke's radius.

Palab slowed down and eventually stopped. The Elites at his side did the same. Palab watched the wind in the upper atmosphere catch the crest of the plume cloud and begin to drag it away slowly. It was a beautiful sight, he thought, but not the way a warrior of Simyaldee's legend should have died.

"Sir." A Sangheili in red questioned. "The Jiralhanae ship still approaches." In the distance, in the heart of the blast plume, the gigantic Assault Carrier parted through the cloud and came to a stop.

"Find he body." Palab stated.

"Sir?" The Elite questioned.

"Simyaldee. We find he body. We not leave him here."

The Elites looked to each other in confusion. "Sir, we do not dishonor the death of a warrior who has died in combat, by removing them from the battlefield. We must leave Simyaldee and Gridolee's bodies to rest here."

Palab looked to the Elite, and lowered his head. He knew that was their way, but Simyaldee was a legend. In countless contests, on countless worlds, Simyaldee's name echoed on the tips of every Elite tongue, but Palab knew him as his leader, and the one Elite that respected his kin.

"â€| Palab, Simyaldeeâ€| somebody answer me!" The transmission was filled with static, but Palab knew the voice of the honorable human, Eric Raynord.

"Me copy." He replied with a heavy brow. Palab knew that Eric had nothing to do with this dishonorable act, but he was still human.

"What's your status?" Eric questioned over the COM, as the signal finally cleared.

Palab looked up as Eric's Pelican slowly began to lower in the distance. "Simyaldee gone and Gridolee gone. They not get away from human weapon."

"What?" Eric questioned in a shocked reply. The Pelican settled and the Grunts literally began to roll out of the ships belly.

Melanie was the first to run to Palab's side. "We lost Simyaldee?" She questioned as she stopped near the group of Elites. Their anger was apparent as they encircled her and began to snarl.

"Back off!" Palab shouted to the enraged Elites. "She follow orders, fight with Simyaldee. She not to blame."

"The humans cower behind their weapons and would not send aid or support!" An angry Elite roared. "This female human is no better then the others! Our brothers' blood is on her hands!"

"Easy big fella!" Melanie fumed as the towering Elite stalked forward; yet she wasn't going to back down. "They would have killed me as well, if you didn't notice! You're not the only one that stayed behind!"

"Stop it!" Palab shouted. He stood between Melanie and the Elite and pushed them apart. "We no fight each other. Brute's coming."

Eric jogged toward the commotion. "Don't dishonor Simyaldee by loosing your temper. We need to prep our defenses and get ready to make a stand. Palabâ€|" Eric paused as he looked down at the Grunt, he could sense that a part of Palab was gone. Simyaldee's death affected him, it affected all of them. "Palab, get your troops to the southern gate of Camp Eden. That Nuke didn't destroy the ship, but it looks like it slowed them down. At least we don't have to worry about

the Flood."

Eric powered up his COM, "Chief, you copy."

"_Roger. Status."_ Kelly replied.

"Simyaldee and Gridolee are KIA. Palab and some of the Elites are on their way to you."

"_Simyaldee's dead?"_ Kelly questioned. _"Understood. I'll notify the rest of the Elites ground forces."_

"Careful, Sir, they may not take the news too well. I advise telling the Elder."

"_I'll take that under advisement. Get your group up here ASAP._"

"Roger that." Eric ended the COM. "Palab, the Chief is going to pass on the word to the Elder and the rest of the Elites in the tank division. We should hurry and catch up."

"Sergeant Palab, Sir, look!" An Elite pointed into the distance as the Jiralhanae assault cruiser stopped over the remains of the airfield, and powered on multiple grav-lifts. "What are they doing?"

Palab sniffed the air and turned back to his ghost. "Giving me more time to prepare. We go to human Camp."

Eric and Melanie quickly made their way back to the Pelican and the Sangheili and Grunts raced to Camp Eden, to prepare for what would most likely become humanities last stronghold.

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Mythic Beast

> Jiralhanae Assault Cruiser
 Abu Simbel Crater site // Abu Simbel, Egypt
> November 2, 2552<p>

"Move us closer to the crater site and deploy a search team." The head Chieftain of the attack division growled. His gravity hammer rested upon his back as he crossed his arms over his expansive chest. He walked closer to the readings and examined the findings. "The humans have done us a favor by dropping their weapon on the Flood. This blast crater is deep, meaning we will not have to waste time digging this time. "

"First teams have been deployed, mighty Chieftain." A crewmate replied. "It is only a matter of time before they find it."

"Do not be so gleeful." The brute snarled. "We have found many traces in earlier dig sites and even if we find a trace of it, it could still be a great distance away. But it will be a clear sign that we are headed in the right direction."

Another crewman added. "Chieftain, our Seraph team has confirmed that the human bombing ship returned to the distant base; Camp Eden."

The Chieftain chuckled to himself. "Everything is being pointed in the direction of the human's stronghold. Are they stupid enough to keep something of such value in the same location as their civilians?"

"We found it!" A Brute shouted. "Another vein!"

The door to the control deck parted and a hover chair floated toward the center. "His holiness Truth will be much pleased."

The Chieftain knelt at the Prophets presence. "High Prophet of Signs, you were once again correct in your decree. We grow ever closer to the Tree of Life."

"Yes, though we are not sure if it is in fact the same." Signs stated. He looked to the screen and thumbed his stubble at the site. "This is the fourth vein we have found. This is very promising, though our tool to confuse the Humans has been destroyed. Have any bodies been found amongst the debris?"

"We have only been searching the crater for the vein, I did not tell my teams to search for Flood hosts. We will not find any adequate hosts in the crater. The human weapon no doubt vaporized any flesh. We will broaden our search beyond the crater."

"Excellent. I will tell my scientists to prepare our last supply of Flood Spores." Signs smirked.

"Your holiness, may I express my concerns. The Flood nearly became too large to contain during that last push."

"This is but another sign of the great beyond, my young Chieftain." Signs smiled. "If the Flood consumes this world, it is of no concern, for the Grand Design is at hand and the Great Journey does not wait for the faint of heart."

Nearly one and half miles away from the crater site, a team of Brutes began to search the rubble for adequate flood hosts. Crumbled human bodies and dismembered Sangheili and Grunts were pulled out from buried pits in the sand and loaded onto transports. One Flood spore would be unleashed into the pile and from there it would eventually spread into the other cadavers, but for now they simply needed to find more bodies.

Several Brutes eventually neared the very edge of the explosion radius and hoped to find more suitable figures to host as combat forms, but the pickings were slim, until they uncovered the prone form of a black armored Sangheili.

"By the Prophets decree!" A Brute shouted. "This one is a Special Operations."

"Ha! What say we keep this one and cook him? He has not been dead long, and his meat may still be tender."

Another Brute bellowed. "The Prophets would not be pleased if we ate a host. But my belly has not had real meat in many days."

But the fourth Brute in the search party silenced them. "Toss it in the transport, you fools. Start looking for others."

The Brutes sighed in displeasure and gripped the leg of the fallen elite. Yet the two brutes that had gripped him noticed that his shield was still active.

"It still has an active shield unit?" The Brute questioned. But his stunned displacement did not stop there. He watched as the bloodied Elites slowly stood to his feet and glared into his eyes.

The four Brutes didn't know what to think of it. "Is it a Flood?"

"No, it is not possible." A Brute returned. "This Sangheili is merely half dead. I'll finish the job!"

"Is there a Prophet on your ship?" The Elite questioned in a staggered slur. Dust fell from his armor as blood dripped from his numerous wounds.

"It still draws the strength to speak." The lead Brute chuckled. "It is no matter to you, Sangheili. You will be dead soon."

"Do not speak our name, cur!" Two twin blades exploded from his hands as the bloody Sangheili sprang forward with one quick lunge. His twin blades cut down the two closest Brutes with a deadly first strike. Plasma from the other two Brutes rained over his shields, but the enhanced shield units of the Mirratord held perfectly. The last two Brutes emptied their ammo into the Elite, but his shields did not fall.

"How is this possible?" The Brute roared as he pulled up his Spiker hand gun. Yet before he could pull the trigger the Elite had stabbed its blade into his gut, spilling his blood onto the rocky ground. The Brute roared in pain, but he was still alive, struggling against the Sangheili's power to pull the sword out of himself. The second Brute tossed his weapons and smashed his fist to his chest in a display of power and rage. He then stampeded toward the Elite and the wounded Brute in his grasp. The Elite simply extended his other blade outward, impaling the charging Brute in the head. The massive creature's own momentum propelled it further upon the energy sword and ended its life.

The Elite scanned the area for other Brutes and then looked back at the creature he had stabbed in the stomach. "Is there a Prophet on your ship?" The Brute gargled on its own blood as it attempted to say something, but only garbled gibberish came forth. "Speak!"

"yes and he will end you all." The Brute spat as his life faded. The Elite raised his blade, severing the Brute's torso from bowel to skull.

The Elite's COM burst with static and he listened in on the channel. "This is Sergeant Palab to all forces. We lost Lieutenant Simyaldee and Gridolee. We lead human base defense. Survivors of supply base need to gather at human base. We form defense there against Jiralhanae ship."

"Forgive me Sergeant." He mumbled to himself as he powered off his com. "If I am presumed dead, then I will do what I can from the shadows. This sudden call in my heart I can not ignore it now. I

nearly lost my life before avenging my loss." He glared at the ship and snarled between exposed teeth. "If it is a war you want Prophets, then it is a war I will bring you!"

Simyaldee paused for a moment, and looked around the area. Gridolee was out there, dead or alive. He thought to look for the young warrior and see if he had survived, but time was critical. Simyaldee knew he had to get to the ship while the gravity lifts were still active. He clipped the hilts of his twin blades to his waist belt, and began his short jog toward the ship's main gravity lift. He could feel his muscles ache with every step, but it didn't matter, he would fight through the pain. Simyaldee looked to his wrist and noticed that his active camouflage was damaged, but his shield generator still functioned at optimal levels. That would have to be enough.

As Simyaldee approached, he could see several Brute search parties scattered about, looking for bodies and at something inside the crater. He ducked inside the remains of the airport hanger and examined the area. He had to slip inside the ship quietly, but surely the smell of his own blood was not going to go unnoticed by the Brutes' nostrils; his suit was stained in his own purple-blue blood. He quickly, and silently, sprinted to the river. A quick dip in the water washed away the blood, but did nothing for his still exposed wounds. He powered on one of his energy swords and held it close enough to the wounds that they were instantly cauterized. The superheated forged energy seared his wounds closed. The pain was excruciating, but he held back his scream of agony. A few short minutes and he had closed all of his wounds, stunting the blood flow. Another quick wash and the smell of fresh blood was gone.

With that taken care of, Simyaldee silently crept out of the waters edge, snapped the neck of Brute that had come to close to his position, and proceeded to a nearby rocky outcropping. From this cover he could see into the crater, and noticed that the Brutes were digging into what appeared to be a giant diamond. It was long, and stretched from one end of the crater to the other. Was this what they were after? They could not have been this lucky to have the humans expose the object in an attempt to kill the Flood. Simyaldee was now split on his next action. Surely he had to get onboard the ship, but the object the Brute's had found demanded his attention.

He cautiously snuck closer, being ever aware of any Brute that so much as seemed curious at his locations. Simyaldee eventually snuck close enough to hear one of the Brute diggers.

"I don't care what the Prophets think, I believe we should kill all the humans first, and then remove the Tree of Life."

Simyaldee nearly gasped at the words. The Tree of Life was also on Earth?

"You don't know anything." A second Brute returned. "The humans are defeated. They won't put up a fight. Besides, they'll make a better meal than anything else on this pathetic world." The two Brutes laughed and Simyaldee slipped passed them toward the gravity lift.

Simyaldee thought to himself, "They found the Tree of Life, but what is it? I remember my teachings from the Academy. The Prophets lecture of faith and religion, and the Tree of Life was the container of all

knowledge. But why would that be here?" Simyaldee looked around, and noticed that two of the guards near the Grav-lift had been killed; their bodies lie motionless upon the ground. Simyaldee crept closer, keeping his eyes sharp. He removed the numerous grenades from their armor and examined how they had been killed. Their necks had been cleanly broken, using a powerful two handed approach; pressure to the base of the skull and quickly pushing the head opposite direction. Killing a Brute in such a manor was not easy, and to kill two was very skillful.

"Gridolee?" Simyaldee questioned. "He must have gone into the ship, thinking the same as I have." Quickly he jumped into the lift and was pulled upward into the belly of the giant ship.

Without his active camouflage there was no longer a need to be sneaky, the Brutes would see him as soon as he entered the cargo bay. Simyaldee knew what would be waiting for him at the top of the lift. He unclipped his twin blades and powered them on. The bulkhead above him parted and he was lifted into the main cargo room. He spun his head and looked around. Sixteen Brutes were in various positions and instantly dropped everything they were doing once he entered the room. If Gridolee was amongst them, he was hiding well, or he had pushed on and was already deeper into the ship. Simyaldee couldn't rest on any assumptions; he had to fight his way out of this.

The gravity lift powered off and lowered him to the bulkhead. Instantly his shields began to spark as hundreds of rounds impacted him. He lurched forward, spanning a five yard gap between him and the nearest Brute in one stride. He cut the creature down and moved to the next. His shields sparked madly as dozens of weapons discharges impacted him, but Simyaldee kept moving. He ducked behind a wraith, giving his enhanced shields a moment to recover and leapt out at the next Brutes in his path. He flung two Brute grenades, impaling them into two unfortunate Brutes. He ducked past them as the grenades exploded, sending needles into all directions. The needles jammed into other brutes nearby as well as the walls and ammo crates. The ammo inside the crates exploded from the needles, creating a chain reaction in the cargo bay.

Simyaldee dashed to the furthest side of the bay, slashing his way through Brutes with every step. An explosion puffed before his eyes as a Brute fired his brute shot grenades at him. Simyaldee ducked as the last round exploded nearby, and he watched as the brute began to reload the heavy weapon. He quickly tossed a plasma grenade and stuck the brute on his arm. The massive creature panicked and dropped his weapon and clawed his armor, desperately attempting to remove the plasma grenade that had stuck to his armor. He unlatched the armor from his arm and pushed it off just as the grenade exploded. The Brute was thrown backwards and impacted the bulkhead. Simyaldee knew the creature was still alive, but he turned and attacked several more of the Brutes.

The Brute that had nearly been killed, reached up and pressed his COM. "Chieftain, a Sangheili Spec Ops has bordered us!"

"A Sangheili?" The Chieftain questioned with an awkward laugh. "Kill him."

"_It has already slain half of our deck crew!_" The Brute roared over the line. There was several large explosions and the Brute began to

scream in agony before static filled the line.

A moment later the line turned on again with a deep Sangheili voice. _"Let me speak to the Prophet in charge."_

The Chieftain pulled down his hammer and waved for his team to join him, but Signs held his arm. "Wait. I will speak with him before you go."

Signs opened the com. "I am the Prophet of Signs, Sangheili. You may speak to me."

Simyaldee replied over the line. _"You! My luck could not be any better. You are the instructor who turned our young watchmen against us!"_

"Your young were simple minded and naïve. They lost their way a long time ago. I merely showed them a better way. All for the glory of the Grand Design. Now, if you surrender and tell me everything the Arbiter is doing I will make your death as painless as possible."

Simyaldee replied over the line. _"In darkness, we will see light. In light, we will see darkness. No matter the location, we will see victory."/i_ Signs gripped his chair with a nervous tingle that could only be generated by the deepest root of fear. His eyes widened, his heart rate quickened and his breathing became sporadic. i"_If we fail, no one will know. Like a ghost, our presence is a mystery â€| Prepare yourself, Prophet. I will bathe in your blood." _ The channel ended.

All eyes gazed toward Signs as he looked toward the Brute Chieftain. "Seal off the deck! Scramble your best soldiers and guard me! Find that Sangheili and kill him! Unleash everything against him! Unleash the Sharquoi!"

The Chieftain squinted curiously at the Prophets hysterical banter. "We do not need that beast to slay one Sangheili."

"You foolâ€| that is no normal Sangheili. He is with the Mirratord!"

The Chieftain grunted. "Mirratord? I know nothing of it. But it does not matter, your Excellency, we will deal with it."

A Brute at a control station began to shout. "Chieftain, I have lost contact with the landing deck."

"What? Someone must be away from there terminal."

"No, Chieftain. I have been using direct communications with their headsets. They are all gone."

Another Brute shouted. "Sir, numerous weapons fire on deck two. It isâ€| waitâ€|. silence. Our forces have been neutralized!"

The Chieftain gritted his teeth and squeezed the hilt of his hammer tighter. "How many of those damnable Sangheili's are on my ship? I have nearly four thousand troops under my command and I will not be hindered by a small boarding party! Combat status! All hands begin

search partiesâ€¦ find that damned Elite and bring me his head." The Chieftain turned to the Prophet and watched as the frail lizard like creature began to float backwards into a corner; he was fearful of even his own shadow. The Chieftain then turned to the deck hands. "Lock down the command deck and summon the wranglers. Tell them to bring the Sharquoi."

- - - - -

Seed Ship

> Slip Space
 October 31, 2552 // Slip Space time distortion present

Three days agoâ€¦.

Supreme Commander Timnaldee stood poised in the center of the Seed Ship's established command center. The multilevel forerunner deck spanned three levels and was bustling with command officers who were attending to each of the various systems and terminal. The ship was once controlled by the Sangheili Elders, but Timnaldee ordered them to return to the Ancient City at the center of the gigantic Forerunner ship; he trusted his command officers much more than the failing eyes of the Elders. Timnaldee glanced over the transmission band, looking for further contact with the Human fleet.

"Any communications?" Timnaldee asked his crew.

"None sir. We left the human system very suddenly, perhaps their transmission has not yet arrived to us."

High Elder Vornaldea, leader of the Sangheili Council of Elders, approached Timnaldee from the rear of the deck. "You made the correct decision, Supreme Commander. The Flood had arrived in the system, and we warned the humans that we would leave at the first sign of Flood activity. Hopefully the humans received our transmission before we left."

Timnaldee was shocked to see the Elder; he spun to face him, flinging his long red cloak with a majestic toss. "Forgive me High Elder. I know what we told the humans, but I do not enjoy fleeing a battle. I should have stayed. The Knight and Piercing Arrow is fully repaired and ready to disembark. The Arbiter needs my aid and my men. The fleetâ€¦"

"All is not lost, Supreme Commander." Vornaldea added as he humbly raised his palm to ease Timnaldee's heartache. "The Arbiter has taken responsibility of our ground forces upon the human world, and you are not the only one that is having difficulty dealing with this. Look around you, see that your brothers in arm are also feeling the call of battle." Timnaldee's golden armor and red cloak hung from his shoulder and piled upon the floor at his feet. His helmet was the elaborate golden headdress of the Supreme Commander of the Sangheili fleet. As he looked around the room, the lights reflected off his armor and shined upon the walls. The majestic banners of the Sangheili hung from the upper levels as he examined every eye of his command crew.

Timnaldee looked to Vornaldea. "High Elder, what are you not telling me?" He sensed that the elder was holding information, and as Supreme Commander he needed to know everything.

"The council has adjourned. And we have made a decision." High Elder Vornaldea looked to the eyes of the command crew before returning his gaze to Timnaldee. "Once we are at a safe distance from the human system, we will let you take the fleet back to Earth."

Timnaldee stood in shock. "But High Elder, this is a completely opposite of your earlier decision."

Vornaldea lowered his head. "There was a transmission received on an older frequency earlier today, was there not?"

"Yes." Timnaldee replied. "But it was weak and degraded. We could not distinguish what it was, or who sent it. You took over the investigation."

"Indeed. We have uncovered the source of this transmission. Once your fleet returns to Earth, we will travel to the source of it. This ship's ability to travel in the other dimension is much greater than any of our ships. We will arrive at the location of the transmission in a short time. "

Timnaldee began to protest. "You will make this journey without the fleet? Elder I can not permit!"

Vornaldea raised his hand and silenced him once again. "We have nothing to fear of them. We know them well. Or I should say, we 'knew' them well."

"No matter elder. Without adequate protection it is unadvisable for you to take such a journey."

"Your concerns are noted, but you must consider the future." Vornaldea replied. "At first, I believed it best to run and hope that the Arbiter and the Commander could deal with Truth, and stop the destruction of the galaxy. But now, I see that there is no escaping our fate. None of us can escape this ordeal, young and old must join in the fight. I am sending you to aid the Arbiter and to command our forces, while the Elders and I journey to the distant star and retrieve what we once lost. We will throw everything we have at the Prophets and regain our Honor!"

Timnaldee could see the passion in Vornaldea's eyes. "Who are they?" Timnaldee eagerly questioned.

"They are the purist of our Bloodline. They are those we once thought were dead, murdered by the Prophets, but we had no proof of the Prophets' involvement. We have found them."

"Are they aware of the Covenant's betrayal? Will they side with us?" Timnaldee questioned further.

"We are not sure, it will take much time for them to receive our transmission however, if we can use the full resources of this Seed ship we hope to return with their army before the Prophets unleash their plans. And there will be nothing that can stop us from finally being free of the Prophets and those wretched Jiralhanae."

Timnaldee lowered his head in thought. This was a complete mystery to him, and the Elder was not revealing much information. "This army you

speak of, is it of Sangheili blood?"

"As I said, Supreme Commander, it is of the purist Sangheili blood!" Vornaldea raised his lower mandibles and formed a smile. "We thought it was gone, but now it has been found. Our Queen, Supreme Commander. Our Queen lives!"

****To be continuedâ€|****

10. The Prophet of Signs

****Level 10: The Prophet of Signs****

Mythic Beast \ Jiralhanae Assault Cruiser
> Abu Simbel Crater site
 Abu Simbel, Egypt
> November 3, 2552<p>

Gridolee leaned into a dark corner, his active camouflage combined with the silhouetted darkness made him invisible to the naked eye. He had just spent the last few minutes tapping into the ship's COM network, in order to monitor every order that the ship master made, to his relief he also intercepted the Prophet's communication with another Mirratord elite.

He removed his hand from his ear and exhaled. "It must be Lieutenant Simyaldee. That changes things greatly." The young Lieutenant was slightly nervous about attacking a full ship of Brutes all on his own, yet now his fear was completely washed away. Simyaldee was also running around the ship, and that was an advantage. He switched channels away from the Brute COM and began to signal the Mirratord private channel. "Second, do you read me?"

"_It is good to hear your voice, young one." _ Simyaldee replied over the channel.

"It is also good to hear yours, Second."

"_Clear your display recorder, we are on assignment for the duration of this operation." _

Gridolee twisted a small dial on his helmet, deactivating his display recorder. "Your orders, Second."

"_Meeting up is unadvised, my cloaking system is damaged. While the ships combatants chase after me, you get to the command deck and kill the Prophet of Signs. I believe you have a debt to repay him."

—

Gridolee's heart skipped a beat. "Sir, what do you mean?"

"_We are the Mirratord, young Gridolee. The Commander and I were aware that Signs infiltrated a spy into our ranks. We've been watching you for some time. I believe you had a change of heart around the time the prophets sent the young Watchmen after us."

—

"You have known all along? High Elder Vornaldea did not tell you my secret?"

"_No. The Elder did not speak to me or the Commander. We have known since the beginning. But now you can prove your loyalty to your kin. Kill Signs, do it now! I have a small platoon of Brutes chasing me toward the turbo shaft in the aft of the ship. I will make as much noise as I can. Signs will never see you coming." _

"I will not fail you, master."

"_You are Mirratord, young one. If I had any doubt in your abilities, you would not be here. When this operation is over, we will have much to discuss. For the Honor of the Mirratord." _

For the last few years, Gridolee never truly understood what the phrase meant. The Honor that the Mirratord had was only amongst themselves, as no other group was aware of their existence, but in the short conversation he instantly began to understand the true meaning of the phrase.

"For the Honor of the Mirratord." Gridolee replied. The channel went silent, and Gridolee lowered his head in thought. His secret was not a secret after all. The Commander, even the Second, had known all along. But instead of calling him out, they used him in return. This was his honor, the opportunity to clear his name, to pull himself away from the mistakes of his youth. Signs had used him, convinced him that the Sangheili race was doomed, and lied to him about his own heritage. Gridolee found his purpose for his loyalty, his reason for saying "for the honor of the Mirratord." He didn't care what the real reason was anymore, he only knew that it had a personal meaning for him.

Inside the Mirratord, you were no longer a unique individual within the Covenant, you carried the weight of the entire Sangheili race. His actions were not his own, his actions were for his kin, his brothers and sisters at arms. For the honor of the Unwritten Mirratord Law. This was what it meant. This was what the phrase that each of the Mirratord warriors was taught as parting words. It was a reminder of their purpose.

Gridolee scanned the area, and stalked out of the corner. He crept quietly throughout the ship as Brutes passed him by. They often stopped, sniffing the air as if they could smell something different, but the Brutes were unaware of what their noses sensed and their eyes didn't. To the Brutes, seeing was smelling, but smelling without seeing was totally different. Gridolee made his way to the bridge, uncontested.

Meanwhile, several decks below and at the rear of the ship, Simyaldee became a one Elite army.

A Brute roared, "Cut off his escape path. Seal him on this deck. We will overwhelm this Sangheili."

Simyaldee knelt to a knee as he breathed deeply. He fumed at hearing his honorable title being slurred through Jiralhanae teeth. He tossed one of his drained twin blades and watched it self detonate in its plasma discharge. He unclipped his second twin blade and smirked at the energy display; only twenty percent charge remained.

He quickly gathered his stamina and watched as four more Brutes burst into the room. "Stupid." He chuckled. He tossed one Plasma grenade

into the door path and watched it stick to the first Brute that entered. The Brute roared as he attempted to remove the armor where the grenade had stuck him. Simyaldee fired a controlled burst of plasma from a nearby Brute plasma rifle and watched as the other three Brutes took cover behind the first screaming brute. Their aggression was their downfall. The plasma grenade detonated, killing the first two brutes and temporarily confused the last two. Simyaldee sprang forward and beheaded them.

Simyaldee looked out the door at the Brute squad leader. "You are next, cur." He snarled.

The Brute took aim and fired while retreating from the corridor. "Chieftain, send more troops to the aft decks! My units have all been slain! The creature is a monster!"

"_You imbecile, you had twenty men in your ranks_"

"Everything we throw at this Sangheili has failed, Chieftain. Its shields are impenetrable."

"_Two hundred more units are on their way to you. It is impossible to fail with that many troops." _

Simyaldee silently slid his energy sword into the Brute's skull. The creature never saw him sneak up behind him, and merely whimpered as the sword cut into his brain. The creature felt no pain as it died. Simyaldee took the Brutes COM and examined the channel.

Simyaldee then changed the channel of his COM to match the Brutes. "This mongrel called you a Chieftain. With Tartarus's death, it would seem that the unified Clan system has been discarded. Is there not one amongst you worthy enough to take the helm as head of all clans, the way Tartarus did?"

The Chieftain laughed over the line. _ "Tartarus was the last of the great nobles. We no longer have to follow his ways. Our clans have regained their status, and once we have eliminated all of you Sangheili, we will follow the Prophets into the Great Journey. Tell me, beast, who are you?" _

"The angel of death." Simyaldee turned off his COM, picked up several grenades from the fallen Brutes, as well as numerous weapons. It was time to make as much noise as he could. He looked to the end of the corridor as the main bulkhead door parted. Dozens of Jiralhanae exited the door, their armor clanging loudly, as they leveled their weapons and fired.

Simyaldee smiled, his eyes sharpened and his heart quickened. "Blood is in the air." He leveled the Brute shot and charged into the pack._

>

Gridolee, on the opposite end of the ship, was reaping the benefits of Simyaldee's deeds. He had made it all the way to the command deck, yet the door was heavily guarded. He counted thirty Brutes and stopped counting; he was sure that there were at least a hundred. If this many sat on this side of the door, then the command deck was most likely swarming with the enemy. He needed to slip inside. He needed for something to happen. But what?

A roar filled the air.

It was a deep sound, filled with the bass of something otherworldly. Gridolee knew the sound, and he was not in a good position if it was coming his way. He quickly darted into a corner and hunkered down. He needed to give the beast a clear path; a wide path. The deck rumbled with the creature's footsteps as shouts filled the corridor.

"Be still, beast!" A brute wrangler shouted. "If you get too excited, there will be no meat for you this day."

Gridolee looked around the corner, but he could only see the wranglers and the chain that held the creature at bay. The monstrous beast that the wranglers were holding in place was still around the corner. The head wrangler dropped his chain and made his way toward the command deck door. Gridolee heard the monstrous beast whimpering and breathing in the distance.

The head wrangler walked toward the door and was greeted by one of the guard. "Tell the Chieftain that I have brought the Sharquoi. What does he want with it?"

The guard nodded and the door began to part. The Chieftain stepped out into the foyer of the command deck and sniffed the air, his nostrils burned from the strong smell of the massive beast. "Where is it?"

"Down the hall, Chieftain."

"Its stench fills the corridor." The Chieftain looked about and motioned toward the wrangler. "This Sangheili has killed nearly two platoons, and I have lost contact with the last group we sent down. This can not be the work of one. It is impossible."

"We brought the Sharquoi in order to deal with the demon." The wrangler added. "The human's 'Master Chief', has done this form of boarding attempts in the past. Perhaps this will be a good test of the Sharquoi's strength."

"Perhaps. But we are not dealing with the Demon this time. Deploy the Sharquoi at the end of the deck near the main lift. It is the only way to get to this deck. The Sangheili is not trying to hide he is making it very clear of his objective. When he comes, unleash the Sharquoi."

"As you command, Chieftain." The wrangler turned and walked back to the group of wranglers and pulled the massive Sharquoi further away from the command deck door.

The Chieftain turned and slowly walked back onto the deck. "Seal the door." The door closed behind him as he motioned through the crowd of Brute guards. He climbed the command podium and looked to the Prophet of Signs. "Thisâ€¦ Mirrator that you fear so much will not come any further."

"Until I see its dead corpse, I will not agree with your certainty." Signs shouted from his corner. Four guards encircled him, while his back to a bulkhead. He frantically rubbed his hands together, nervously drying the sweat that dripped from his pores.

"If he comes upon this deck, he will face the Sharquoi, and then the added firepower of nearly one hundred of my best troops, and then he will face me. And I cower before no Sangheili. He is skilled, but he is not immortal."

Signs chuckled. "A bold statement, Chieftain. But you have no idea of what the Mirratord are capable of. One Mirratord warrior has been known to make an entire heretic battalion vanish from existence."

"What is this, Mirratord?" The Chieftain questioned. "I have not heard of them."

"The Sangheili created them during the time of the great union, when the Jiralhanae were first brought into the Covenant. A secret force of highly trained killers. If you fear the human's Master Chief, then you should very well fear the Mirratord. Many of my brothers have been slain by their hands. And the Sangheili council always finds a way to cover it up. They work in the dark, secretly, and they only kill those that have made it publicly known that they are against the Sangheili way of life."

The Chieftain looked across the room at the Prophet, as he nervously fidgeted in his floating throne. "Nonsense. You speak of things that are impossible. It is no more than a combination of legend and rumor."

"Yet here we are, Chieftain. Locked away hoping that the full compliment of my Cruiser can slow down thisâ€¦ legend." The Prophet seemed irritated that the Chieftain did not believe him. "When his blade sits at your throat, you will believe me then."

The Brute snarled and glared at the Prophet from high atop his podium. "I only believe that a skilled opponent has come. Mirratord or not, no one creature can possibly fight its way through my entireâ€¦." The Brute's eyes grew twice as large as he watched a single forged blade of energy appear behind the Prophet.

He was speechless.

"Chieftain, what is it?" Sign's nervously questioned. He watched as the Chieftain gripped his gravity hammer and jump down toward him. "What is the matter?"

The Chieftain screamed to his command crew. "To arms!" Signs sat motionless as the single blade slowly crossed his vision and rested a few inches from his throat.

Gridolee exhaled. "It is been a long time, Signs."

Sweating and trembling, Signs pushed his head backwards, trying desperately to keep the blade away from him, but he suddenly recognized the voice. "Gridolee, is that you?"

Gridolee snarled. "Would you rather I call you your holiness, or mentor? Perhaps teacher would be better suited to your ears?"

Signs exhaled heavily. "Thank the Gods it is you. I feared the worse." Signs raised his hand toward the Chieftain as he and his

Brutes stalked closer. "Be at ease, Chieftain, he will not harm me."

Gridolee tilted his head in confusion. "I do not share your confidence. I do believe I am going to kill you. And then kill the rest of these Brutes."

"Gridolee, I have no intention of letting you talk this way. Thanks to you, we have a better understanding of the Sangheili's betrayal."

"Silence!" Gridolee yelled as he pressed his blade closer to the Prophet's neck. "Do not speak our sacred name, Prophet! Are you under the suspicion that I am here to rejoin you? I betrayed my race, my kin, my honor, all because of your lies. And then— my academy brothers and sisters, they turned against us. My Watchmen class turned against the Elders and attempted to kill them. You said the Unggoy's would be a sign of weakness, but they have brought us more strength. That an Unggoy with the rank of a Sangheili would be a sign of damnation! Palab is the noblest of warriors I have seen, and he fights with honor! Because of your lies, your treachery, I have lost so much. "

"Gridolee listen to me." Signs stuttered. "You have always been my favorite, when I heard that your ship left Earth, I grew weary. I have always wondered where you were!"

"There were Jiralhanae troops on board our ship!" Gridolee roared. "We were caught of guard and imprisoned. If you cared so much you should have sent word or a warning to me." Gridolee looked up and noticed the Brutes were still inching closer. "But none of that matters now. Now, you will pay for your dead of crossing the Unwritten Mirratord Law."

"What is this law?" Signs nervously questioned.

Gridolee raised his lower mandibles and formed a smile. "To do evil to the Sangheili way of life and traditions— is to die by Sangheili hands. I found my honor; the meaning of the Mirratord parting Phrase." Gridolee deactivated his active camouflage and glared into the Chieftain's eyes. "Uphold the Honor of the Sangheili way of life. Protect the safety of our future and life. Remember the unwritten law and never forget its purpose.

"For the Honor of the Sangheili way of life." Red blood began to trickle from Signs throat as Gridolee pressed his blade deeper into his skin.

"For the Honor of the unwritten law!" Gridolee pressed it deeper into the Prophets neck. The smell of burning flesh and blood swarmed into his nostrils as Signs began to gag. The frail Prophet gripped Gridolee's arm, but he could not pull the Sangheili away. Signs' screams were only heard by deaf ears.

"For this honor I spill the blood of all those who threaten my kin, my brothers, and my way of life!" Gridolee glared into the eyes of the Brute Chieftain as he swiped his blade through the Prophet of Sign's throat, severing his head. He palmed Signs' head and held it up for all the Brutes to see.

"For the Honor of the Mirrator!" Gridolee roared as he snarled at the Brute Chieftain.

The Chieftain fumed and huffed. His fur began to stand on end as his anger grew. His posture became more threatening as he palmed his hammer in both hands. The familiar sound of twisting leather cried out as the Brute squeezed the hilt of his hammer and snarled. Drool crept through his monstrous teeth as he snarled and raised his hammer over his head.

"Face me Sangheili!" He screamed. "I have dreamt of facing a warrior of your skill! Bleed before me as I make you beg for your life!"

Gridolee dropped the Prophet's head, pulled up his second twin blade and jumped forward; off of the hover chair and into the pack of Brutes.

Gridolee smiled, his eyes sharpened and his heart quickened. He was a Mirrator.

The Chieftain lowered his hammer as a wave of gravity pulsed from the end. Gridolee crossed his blades, and blocked the blast, but he was propelled backwards. He tumbled in the air and planted his foot into the face of a Brute, stabbed another and rolled across the floor. Plasma rained from every direction, slowly depleting his enhanced shields. He attacked the first Brute in his eyesight and used his body as a shield. Gridolee sprinted around the room, making himself a harder target to hit. He jumped up to the command Podium as two brute shot grenades impacted him. The pressure from the explosions made him stumble but he quickly focused and tossed a plasma grenade. The Brute dodged the grenade and rolled off of the podium.

Gridolee was all alone on the Command Podium as hundreds of Brutes and Grunts circled below. Getting into the Command Deck was easy when the Chieftain opened the door, but getting out was not going as simplistic. Fifteen Brutes charged up the ramp, Gridolee tossed all of his plasma grenades toward them, and they exploded in a chain reaction. Eight of the Brutes died in the charge, while the remaining numbers fired blindly through the mist of brute blood. Gridolee ran toward the ramp, stabbed, chopped and gutted the last of the Brutes, and backed away from the edge. He knelt low on one knee, regained his strength and awaited the next assault. Grenades of various kinds sat at his side from the fallen Brutes; including weapons. Gridolee examined his dual swords; thirty and forty-five percent charge remained. He would have to fight on the fly, grabbing weapons as he went.

Gridolee's shields sparked as needler rounds pinged against him. He rolled further into the center of the podium so that the grunts could not get a good target lock with the homing weapons.

"Is that the best you can do, Chieftain?" Gridolee shouted. "Letting your Unggoy take shots at me from the distance?" Gridolee's eyes widened as ten blue flares arced upward into the lofted ceilings. The Grunts had calculated his position when he shouted. A stupid error he should not have made. Gridolee's arrogance had once again slipped out and caused him trouble. The grenades landed around him, he had no means of escape. He hunkered down and roared in pain as the blast pressure tossed him around the podium.

Cheers came from the Grunts and Brutes as they watched the explosion, yet their excitement ended when Gridolee stood, bloody but alive, and began to throw numerous grenades back at them. The number of troops loitering around the floor made it impossible to take cover. Bodies flew in all directions as the grenades exploded. Brutes and Grunts shouted in pain as waves of them died. Their numbers had been severely cut in half by a few dozen plasma and spike grenades.

The Chieftain pushed through the crowd toward the helm. "Move the ship toward the human camp at best speed. Then deploy our first garrison. If we lose the ship to the Sangheili, at least my ground forces will have deployed."

"Yes Chieftain." The helmsman snarled.

The COM officer snapped back. "Sir, the guards outside are signaling that they are being attacked!"

"What?" The Chieftain roared.

"There is another Sangheili, it is fighting the Sharquoi. There must be two of them!"

"Two? Then this one must have snuck in when I opened the door." The chieftain snarled at his own laps in judgment. In close quarters there was no way to fight these 'Mirratord' Sangheilis, but at least he could begin his attack on the human base. "Helm, set a collision course for the human base. Notify all hands to abandon ship. Things will change once we get some dirt under our feet. Even with my last three thousand troops, we can overwhelm the human defenses."

Outside the door, the Brutes listened as the Sharquoi unleashed a blood curling roar. The creature was still out of sight, somewhere near the main deck lift further down the corridor and around a corner. Suddenly there was a loud thud as the Sharquoi crumbled to the ground. The Brutes all stepped back in shock. The creature that took years to tame, had been killed. A Sharquoi was known to go into fits of rage, unleashing its anger upon dozens of wranglers. It would take dozens of heavily armed warriors to stop the beast. But a single Elite had just slain one. A single warrior had killed a Sharquoi.

Simyaldee staggered around the corner, holding his side as blood dripped from his jaw, helmet and shoulder. The Sharquoi was a worthy opponent, and wounded him severely, but he had lived through worse. His shoulder was dislocated, several bones had been broken, and his vision was blurry from sweat and blood. Simyaldee's shields flashed as they recharged and he looked up to the Brute forces standing near the command deck door. He had hoped that Gridolee had made it this far, but there was no longer any time to wait, Simyaldee had to come to the Command deck. He grunted as he knelt down and picked up a discarded carbine, but only ten rounds remained in the ammo pod.

The ship wide COM echoed to life. _ "All hands abandon ship! I repeat. All Hands abandon ship! Ground forces deploy level one infiltration gear. All Seraph and Banshee squadrons deploy immediately. Foot soldiers, rendezvous at grid Alpha One. Ramming speed is set. Abandon ship!" _

The door to the Command deck parted and Brutes and Grunts poured out in a frantic wave. They scattered in all directions, each heading toward escape pods and insertion pods. Simyaldee was amazed when several Brutes ran passed him, giving him a wide birth. A few of them attempted to fire at him, but Simyaldee fired his recovered carbine rifle before they could take aim. The warrior within Simyaldee wanted to stop them from escaping, but he was exhausted. The fight with the Sharquoi had taxed any remaining energy he had; barely able to hold up the covenant carbine. After the deck Cleared, Simyaldee made his way to the command door and watched as Gridolee embedded the blade of his Brute shot into the chest of Brute.

The Chieftain turned from the helm and climbed the Podium ramp and swung his mighty hammer, knocking Gridolee off his feet, but he recovered and charged before the Brute could swing again. Gridolee locked the Brute shot blade between the Chieftain's arms and twisted, slicing off one of the Brutes hands. The Chieftain roared, not in pain but in defeat, as he stumbled backwards.

"Whatâ€¦ are you?" The Brute cried. He stood and stampeded toward Gridolee, his bloody stump swinging madly at Gridolee. Gridolee raised his Brute shot and dropped the blade into the Chieftain's shoulder. Armor, skin, muscle and bone shattered in its path. He pressed the heavy, dulled blade, deeper into the Chieftain until it wouldn't go any further. The Chieftain gasped his last ounce of air, falling backward into a pool of Brute blood.

Simyaldee slowly walked up the ramp, holding his wounded side as he examined the room. "I see you killed the Prophet." He was amazed at the site. Fragments of Brutes, puddles of blood, and Grunt bodies were everywhere.

"Yes sir, as were your orders." Gridolee chuckled as he slumped forward. In the moment he relaxed, he began to feel every wound. His chest, back, head, arms, legs, everything hurt. Blood dripped through his mandibles as well as pooled under his armor. His wounds were extensive, but as were Simyaldee's.

"Stand, young one. I have not given you permission to die." Simyaldee ordered as he approached the Helm controls.

"Yesâ€¦ sir." Gridolee moaned as he stood. He held his side and approached the station, whipping his bloody mandibles upon the back of his hands. "Secondâ€¦ your injuriesâ€¦"

Simyaldee hovered over the controls. "I am not dead yet. The Jiralhanae have locked the heading toward the Human camp. I can not change course."

"Escape pods have launched, as well as insertion pods. Full evacuation."

"COM status?"

Gridolee examined the COM station. "Active."

"Open a channel to the Sergeant." Simyaldee ordered.

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Mid Egypt \ Camp Eden Second line Defense Zone
> November 3, 2552<p>

"I repeat. This is Sergeant Eric Raynord out of Camp Charley. Eden, do you copy?" The roar of the Pelican whirled around Eric as he stood over the pilot and copilot's shoulders. He gazed forward at the expanding desert terrain as he waited for a response.

"_We read you loud and clear, Sergeant. We have you're ground troops on Route 117, heading north at sixty-five mph. Your distance to the Second line of defense is twenty-two miles. We are tracking your Pelican at an altitude of one-hundred fifteen feet." _ Eric's COM was received and his ground troops had been spotted. At least now the Camp Eden Defense Zone was aware that they were coming.

"I'm requesting additional troops to form up with the remainder of Charley Company; call sign Red Squad. Ten grunts if you can spare them."

"_Negative, Red Squad. We can not spare any troops at this time. Stand by for Major Rawlings." _

"The Major?" Eric questioned to himself. "What the hell does she want now?"

"_Sergeant Raynord, I believe your troops were given a direct order. Were they not?" _

"I don't copy ma'am."

"_Section III gave official orders to both Melanie Peters and Mathew Collins. You were order to extract Spartan 087." _

"We were in a heavy combat situation at Abu Simbel, ma'am. The safety of Camp Eden is our utmost priority. Spartan 087 has chosen to remain in combat. Most likely we should â€|"

"_I don't care about the situation, Raynord! An order was given and once again you have proven your inability to follow them. You and your Black Ops will resume ONI classification; your Red Squad cover is hereby dropped. Now, bring me Spartan 087." _

"Permission to speak freely, ma'am?"

"_If you insult my decision, Raynordâ€|"_ The deep growl in her voice was cut only by Eric's ability to speak over her.

"You can not pull the best strategic option we have away from combat. ONI has pulled a lot of stupid decisions in these last few weeks, ma'am, but this one is insane. We need her in combat."

"_What do you think I am trying to do, Raynord? The sooner she arrives, the faster we can get her back into combat. I do not have to explain my actions to you!" _

"Every second counts, Major. But I fear you have a personal agenda in this."

"_My order will be obeyed. Be thankful that I anticipated your disapproval. If you survive the coming battle, I fully intend to

unleash every available resource against you and the Black Ops, but for now you will simply have to defend this Zone without Spartan 087." _

"Major, I understand your position, but she has decided to fight."

"_She is a soldier, just like you. And she can not make decisions on her own._"

The radar began to beep on the Pelican's control board. The copilot flipped the switch and examined it. "Sir, inbound Pelican. Unmarked."

Eric looked out into the distance. "Major! What in the hell are you doing? Think of the lives you are putting at risk!"

"_If I don't do this, we will all die." _

Eric switched channels. "Kelly, do you copy? Spartan 087, respond!"

The copilot looked over his shoulder. "Feedback static; the channels are being jammed, sir."

"Shit! Get us down there!"

Below Eric's Pelican, an unsuspecting Spartan sat upon the side of a scorpion battle tank. Her mind focused only on how to arrange her troops in order to defend against the Brute's that would eventually make their way toward them. She looked over her shoulder toward the trailing line of vehicles and soldiers. Warthogs, scorpions, ghosts, and wraiths, Humans, Grunts and Elites, all followed in a slow line of firepower heading toward the secondary line of defenses. The wastelands flanking the procession stretched for miles and only the hills added any verity to the scenery. But the mind numbing rumble of the tank treads and engines quickly faded as a dust storm kicked up from the turbines of an approaching Pelican.

Kelly looked upward as the bird soared ahead of her tank and began to settle on the road. She tapped the scorpion's canopy and the marine driver came to a stop. Kelly held up her fist for the trailing vehicles to also cease forward progress.

The Pelican landed on the road with its rear ramp in clear view. The ramp lowered and two figures stood side by side in the belly of the bird. Kelly zoomed in and quickly noticed that the smaller figure was Roselyn Santos.

"What's going on?" Kelly mumbled as she stepped down from the tank. She quickly walked toward the bird as the larger figure beside Rose stepped forward. This figure was an unknown. He or she was wearing a new form of battle armor that Kelly had never seen before, and it stood an impressive six-foot-nine inches tall. The unknown figure pulled up a side arm and left it at its side. It was a non-threatening gesture, but clearly a sign of aggression. Kelly replied by doing the same. She quickly pulled up her Magnum, and let it hang in her hand at her side. Her thumb gently flicked off the safety.

"Chief Petty Officer Spartan 087, you have your orders. Board this ship, now." It was a line of sight transmission, directly into Kelly's helmet COM. No one else heard it. The voice was light, and young; clearly female.

"Who are you and what are you doing with Rose?"

"Private Santos is needed for the purpose of the MJOLNIR VII project at the Ark crater site. And so are you. Please board the bird now, ma'am."

"New armor at the Ark site?" Kelly questioned in thought. Though tempted to see what new tools she could acquire Kelly knew that she was needed here. "Can't this wait?"

"No ma'am. Every minute is precious."

Rose spoke and began to move toward the end of the ramp, the Spartan III did not attempt to stop her. "Kelly. I need you. You have to come with me."

"I guess the Major got to you. We need to fight this war, we â€|"
Kelly spoke through her external speaker.

Rose cut in. "A war we can not win. Not unless we find a technological advantage. Truth has the Ark, and soon he will learn how to fire it. I resisted at first, but once the Major informed me of the plan I quickly began to understand." Rose was sincere. She was pleading for Kelly to come with her. "Help me finish the Armor. I'm so close to unlocking itâ€| but I need you. With this Armor we can stop Truth."

Kelly lowered her head in thought, but slowly raised her weapon and aimed outward, toward her right side. With her arm stretched out at shoulder level, she turned her head and glared into the silhouetted image of a human figure. The figure began to reappear, a cloaking technology, and the figure was in similar armor as the woman on the Pelican. This one, however, stood poised with an Assault Rifle aimed at Kelly.

"Your cloaking system is impressive, but I heard every footstep you made." Kelly coldly stated.

The Spartan III on the pelican stepped forward and placed her gun to Rose's head. "Drop your weapon and board the pelican. We do need Santos, but I have been authorized to use lethal persuasion if necessary."

Another Pelican dusted off on the side of the road and two soldiers sprinted outward. Both were dressed in the all black ODST fatigues of the Black Ops, but neither wore a helmet. Eric and Melanie sprinted toward Kelly and leveled their BR-55 battle rifles. They quickly took aim on the unknown figures.

"Rose?" Eric whispered.

"Drop the weapon!" Melanie shouted toward the Spartan at Kelly's side. The Spartan III did not reply. His finger stayed ready on the trigger. "Now, damn it!"

"You heard the lady, drop it!" Eric added. "Everybody calm down!"

On their private channel, Kate spoke to her three teammates. "009, we can't win a shootout against the Black Ops and Spartan 087. Back off."

Greg sighed over the com. "Roger that, 017." Greg lowered his Assault rifle and began to move slowly toward the pelican. However, Kelly never let her side arm's site leave him.

Kate added into the line. "Team, prepare for back up plan." She then spoke to Rose. "It's up to you now." Kate pulled down her side arm and slipped it back into its holster.

Kelly finally relaxed. "If you prove to be a threat to this defense operation, I will eliminate that threat."

Rose walked toward Kelly and placed a hand on her shoulder. "I hope you understand, this Kelly. The Prophets have taken control of the Earth. I'm sorry. We, humanity, don't have a choice anymore."

Rose slid her hand down Kelly's armor to a location just above her chest plate. Kelly instantly noticed the action and what Rose was moving her hand towards. She began to pull away, but found that her armor was now moving at only a quarter of its normal power output. She focused on her settings, checking everything with her mind. A display popped up on her HUD, showing that her power output was being reduced. Suddenly blue sparks began to scatter around her as Kelly's suit began to lose reserve power. A blue orb was held in Rose's opposite hand and she dropped it onto the concrete road. The orb began to hum loudly and engulfed Rose and Kelly. Kelly's HUD flickered with static and misaligned images.

With a flick of her wrist, Rose terminated the main power cell on the MJOLNIR armor and Kelly's HUD went to normal optics. She could only see what was in front of her. Her radar, ammo gauge, shield monitor, and active readings had been switched off. The Incredible weight of the MARK VI bore down on her, but she could still move. She struggled and maintained her footing as she fought to hold her balance without power.

Rose leaned down and picked up the shiny blue orb and turned it off. She then looked to Eric as he sat motionlessly staring at her. "A Power Drainer; another new toy from my friends in R and D."

With split second actions the Spartan III that was stepping away, quickly gripped Kelly under his arm and guided her sluggishly toward the Pelican. Kelly attempted to push him away, but the SPI armor was able to hold her steady with little effort. Kelly then tried to power on her suit, but Greg locked her hands in place before she could power on the main systems.

"Sorry, Ma'am." Greg stated to Kelly. "Our armor isn't as strong as yours, but without power you can't resist me."

Rose turned toward the Pelican and followed the Spartan's. "They need me Eric, and I need Kelly. I can't explain it right now, but I have no choice but to go with them."

Melanie began to motion toward the pelican, an act to stop this

obvious kidnapping, but Eric grabbed her arm and held her at bay.

Rose smiled toward Eric as the pelican's ramp began to Rise. "Keep fighting and don't die. Give me the time I need to finish this. I need you to do that for me, Eric. Protect the Tree of Life." The ramp sealed and Rose pocketed the Power Drainer. She then turned to Kelly and removed her helmet as Greg sat her on the bench. Without power, the Mark VI would only hold oxygen for a few minutes.

"I know you're upset, but you have to understandâ€¦" Rose pulled the helmet from Kelly's head and glared into the eyes of someone who was struggling to fight back her rage. Every muscle in Kelly's jaw flexed as she contained her anger. Rose had the suspicious feeling that if her side arm holster was working, Kelly would have shot her. "You have to forgive me, Kelly. You don't understand the big picture." The engines of the Pelican hummed louder as they took off, away from the road and Camp Eden.

"I understand it far more then you do, Santos!" Kelly snapped. "You are sacrificing the lives of nearly every man woman and child that is hiding beneath Camp Eden, just so you can work on an upgrade."

"You are a Reclaimer, and only a Reclaimer can access the sub-systems of the Reclaimer armor." Rose snapped in return. "The Major debriefed me on your importance a few moments ago. Once you access the suit's sub systems I will find what I need to give the new suit a substantial boost in output. The Reclaimer armor is too old and degraded to be used, but I took a spare Mark VI and a few SPI armor parts and began working on the Mark VII. All I need is a substantial amount of data to help improve it. Please, Kelly. I need you."

"I don't have much of a choice." Kelly snarled.

Back at the road, everyone stood in shock. The marine in the front tank lifted the canopy and glared out at the Sergeant. "Sir, was Spartan 087 just kidnapped by our own forces?"

Eric turned and looked at the troops that were sitting and watching. Several warthogs had pulled up to the front and all of their eyes were fixed on Eric. "This changes nothing. We will still deploy into a defensive front and stop the Brute assault."

"But sir, this is insane! Stupid Brutes are attacking from behind, and our forces are screwing us in the front. What the hell is going on?"

"Fall back in line. I didn't say you could bitch." Eric looked around, turning his back to the marines. Melanie joined him and they began to talk privately.

"Damn Spartan IIIs." Melanie sighed. "I wonder how long they've been on Earth? This is some seriously deep shit."

"No kidding." Eric sighed as he dried a bead of sweat. "We pull up to that second line, and those marines just might have the order to shoot at us. I can't believe this is happening? Plus, Major Rawlings just cleared our activation. We are officially Black Ops again."

"So do I call you Senior Chief, or are you still a First Sergeant?"

Melanie sighed. "This whole ONI and Marine fiasco is really pissing me off."

"Being covert is part of the duty. Let's keep our Marine cover going for now."

"Doesn't the Major know that by activating our Black Ops classifications, she is in fact allowing us to use our ONI clearance?"

"She does." Eric folded his arms in thought. "I'll be damn. She's smart, very smart. I don't think I could have thought of it if you hadn't mentioned that."

"What?" Melanie questioned.

"We have our ONI clearance, which means we can practically do whatever we want to do."

"But how does that help the Major... wait, she was bluffing?"

"Camp Eden gave our direct position to that Pelican that just landed. Those Spartan IIIs took Rose and Kelly to the Ark site. But Truth has control of the Ark site."

"Someone is trying to pull the wool over someone else's eyes." Melanie thought aloud. "We can radio Admiral Hood. He's gone to bat for us in the past. Maybe he has more info."

"I tried to talk to Hood before I left Camp Eden to join up with you guys. The Brute's are jamming every channel. We don't even know if Cairo station is still up there."

"That's probably why the Major feels that she can get away with this shit." Melanie spat into the sand. "There's no way Admiral Hood would allow this. She's mixing spook tactics with covert operations. Who is she trying to fool?"

"She's trying to fool the only creature who would be listening to everything that is going on in this region of the world; Truth. She made a big scene, causes some confusion and then gave us our ONI clearance. Then Rose—"

"Oh boy—" Melanie huffed at Rose's name.

"Rose told us about the Tree of Life." Eric continued.

"She gave us our clearance so that we could get into the Box?"

"It's all I've got." Eric shrugged.

"Sir!" A marine shouted. Eric and Melanie turned around as the massive Brute ship rolled over ahead. The ground rumbled as everyone instinctively ducked, but the ship was several hundred feet in the air. Dust was flung around from the wake of the ship's speed and Eric raced to the nearest hog.

"Can you reach Camp Eden?"

"No Sir, they've gone silent." The female Marine added as she

examined the COM.

Eric sighed. "They raised the shield grid. No COM when the power is being used for defense." A ghost quickly sped toward the group and Palab jumped out.

"Sergeant, me hear from Simyaldee." Palab shouted in excitement. "He on ship, he alive with Gridolee. They take over ship but Brutes lock heading. Can't change course! Brutes leave ship."

"I'll be damn." Eric switched on his COM. "08, get to the front of the pack. Lead the ground troops toward Camp Eden." Eric and Melanie ran toward the Pelican, Palab galloped behind. "Be cautious of Brute ground forces in the area. And try to make contact with Simyaldee and Gridolee!"

"_Roger thatâ€¦ wait, Simyaldee's alive?"_Mathew replied back.

"You damn right he is." Eric cursed as he climbed into the Pelican. "05, Palab and I will race ahead with the pelican to assist the second line. Meet us there when you can." Eric killed the COM.

Palab waddled to the front of the Pelican as it began to take off. "What we do now?"

"We protect the Tree of Life."

To be continuedâ€¦.

11. Protocols for surrender

Level 11: Protocols for surrender

Ark Excavation site // Mombasa observatory
> ONI Facility Bravo A-11092G: The Gatekeeper
 November 3, 2552

"How deep can they dig?"

"As deep as they want to. We can't stop them. Our forces are in shambles, and HighCOM is under direct assault from a Brute Carrier wing."

"How many ships does Truth have in his arsenal? It seems like more ships show up everyday."

"The ships he has above us aren't even a fraction of his forces. Most of the Elite ships are fighting the Brutes in orbit. We've received confirmed reports of Brute ships on every continent on Earth, including the poles. Civilian prisoners have been taken in North America, Japan and Europe. Marine forces are engaged in stronghold defenses in countless locations around the worldâ€¦ and then there's the Chief."

"That Spartan is still alive?"

"He's managed to save several platoons on his way here, but getting faster transportation seems to be a problem. Time is crucial, but with those Brute Seraph patrols in the areaâ€¦ well, any pelicans

that get close to the ground are shot down."

"I recall the situation was not promising. Do you think he is really needed? Halsey's freaks are old news."

"Deny it as much as you want, Colonel, your Spartan III's have not done nearly as much as the Master Chief has during this war."

"If they were here and on the front linesâ€¦"

"Then why aren't they here?"

The two men looked towards the view screen in silence as dozens of Covenant ships dug away layers of debris, slowly exposing the massive structure of the Ark. One of the men lowered his head and wiped away the sweat beads that trickled slowly from his brow.

He looked to the younger man to address him. "They're all gone. Save only a handful that I had not sent to Onyx."

"The Shield World?" The younger man questioned mockingly. "I just finished catching up on the report. You were warned, Colonel."

"How were we to know that Delta Halo would thankfully misfire?"

"It is ironic that the salvation of the galaxy would be the downfall of your SIII program." The man smiled smugly, giving the Colonel no since of sympathy. "The misfire sequence triggered the activation of the Shield World. You should have warned Ambrose. But now, all you can do is sit and pray that your Spartan IIIs are still alive."

"I stand by my decisions."

"Just like your decision to abandon your Halo outpost?"

"When did this become a direct attack against me? You young punks don't understand the nature of Section III and the reason we make the decisions we do."

"I understand that the 501 battle group was nearly annihilated in its first day of combat, yet you somehow escaped unscathedâ€¦ and happily found your way down here. Why didn't you go to HighCom, Colonel? Or better yet, why not dock at Cairo station and fight alongside Admiral Hood? What brings you to the Gate?"

"Like I said, kid, you will never understand why Section III makes the decisions it makes." The Colonel powered off the monitor and returned to his seat at a table. The lights powered on and the young man adjusted his vision. He turned his head away from the light and brushed his hair out of his face. The Colonel began to thumb through a small booklet which was covered in dust. Imprinted on the cover were the words UNSCDF: Terms and conditions of surrender.

"We'd rather die than surrender, Colonel." The young man stated through gritted teeth.

"You didn't seem that eager to die when Major Rawlings threatened to put you in front of a firing squad. Did Black Ops 19 teach you some courage?" The young man remained silent. The Colonel felt a sense of joy at finally silencing the young man. "Now, since I'm here, why

don't you explain to me how we lost control of the Seed ship? And I'd also like to know why Major Rawlings and my Spartans are missing in action?"

- - - - -

Mythic Beast // Jiralhanae Assault Cruiser
> Camp Eden Defense Zone
 Central Egypt
> November 3, 2552<p>

Moving at a snails pace, Gridolee and Simyaldee stumbled through the corridors of the massive Brute ship. Their wounds were finally catching up to them, and struggle as they might they could not move any faster. Simyaldee shouldered Gridolee's arm and offered the young warrior some support to lean on. The two of them slowly made their way through several levels of the ship, and finally neared an unused set of escape pods.

"Not much further." Simyaldee gasped as he turned a corner. It took them nearly ten minutes to reach the lower levels, but time was soon about to escape them. An alarm sounded throughout the ship.

"Blast!" Gridolee snarled. "We made it this far, only to burn in this Jiralhanae tomb." Gridolee had set the collusion alarm to sound throughout the ship, to warn them that their time was nearly up.

"We still have time." Simyaldee added as he neared a pod. He palmed the wall display, activating it. The panel glowed to life and Simyaldee quickly inputted his Spec Ops access code. Hopefully the Brutes had not taken the time to change them. The door parted and Simyaldee blindly flung Gridolee inside. He dived in behind him and rolled to the launch controls. There was no time to strap in. "Hold on."

The escape pod thumped to life as its engines propelled it from the belly of the ship. Simyaldee was thrown backwards, his head hitting the metal frame; his shattered helmet took the brunt of the impact. Gridolee hung on for dear life, but his grip slipped and he also began to tumble around the escape pod.

The Mythic Beast maintained its forward progress as the stationary guns of Camp Eden began to fire. The shields of the ship easily held against hundreds of ground turret cannon fire as the ship impacted Camp Eden's shield grid. The ship slowed on impact, but only by half its speed. It continued to push forward, propelled by the same engines that could throttle it into orbit, and the shields of Eden finally gave under the tremendous force. The hull of the Mythic Beast began to crumble from the forward decks toward the aft; crushing itself against the slowly weakening shields. Explosions riddled the once mighty ship as debris spat from all sides. Yet the massive weight and speed of the ship was too much for the human engineered shields of Camp Eden to withstand.

A bright flash of energy escaped the bubble formed around the base as the remains of the Brute ship speared into the base. The ship was nearly one-third the size of Camp Eden, and its impact was catastrophic. Buildings were toppled, roads were whipped away like sand, and fires scattered across the base. The Brute ship's internal damage finally gave way and the engines began to fade. Secondary explosions marked all around the ship and Camp Eden as the base's

power grid failed from the impact.

The upper level of Camp Eden was without power and defenseless.

Several miles behind the ship soared Eric Raynord's Pelican. Everyone on board looked ahead as the Brute ship flashed and sank into the base. Their hearts dropped.

Melanie powered up her COM. "Camp Eden, do you copy? This is Red Squad, come in!" She frantically shouted but no reply came.

Eric shook his head. "They're in the dark, and Brute forces are most likely regrouping to attack. Palab, any word from Simyaldee?"

Palab placed his hand to his ear and listened for anything on the Mirrator or Spec Ops frequency. "Me hear nothing."

The radar alarm blurred to life and the co-pilot quickly scanned the area. "Seraph interceptors inbound!"

"Shit!" Eric cursed as he turned to his side and picked up his helmet. He pulled it on as a soft hiss filled the air, signaling that he had achieved an air tight seal. "05, button up." Melanie cursed beneath her breath as she pulled on her helmet. Eric and Melanie's helmets were new ODSST replacements and had yet to be field modified to the Black Ops tastes, but the standard updates would come in handy. Eric keyed in the local radar signatures as friendly's and attached names to each: Palab, 05 and the two pilots.

Eric leaned close to the co-pilot. "Radio our coordinates to any nearby Longswords or Skyhawks— anything that can give us cover fire!"

The co-pilot switched to the local military channel. "Mayday, mayday! The is Nine tail 087 out of Camp Eden to any nearby fighter groups. We need immediate air support. Mayday, mayday! Our coordinates are—"
The helm exploded as plasma fire melted through the top of the pelican, killing the co-pilot and pushing the pilot and his seat out of position to fly the bird. A group of Seraph fighters had fired off a lucky shot. Eric was thrown back as the Pelican nose dived and began to spin out of control. The engines sputtered and died. The pelican was barely over one hundred feet from the ground when it was hit, and though it was going to be a short trip to the ground, the impact was still going to be a wakening experience.

Palab rolled about the cabin, using his nimbleness to move closer to Melanie. He gripped her in his claws, wrapped his arms around her, and spun counter to the ship's rotation just as the ship slid into the soft grassy soul of the surrounding perimeter of Eden. Unlike the dusty and dry area beyond Camp Eden's gates, the interior was a lush and tropical manmade zone. The landing was a soft one but it still jaw rattling. The bird moaned as the forward cockpit warped out of shape, and the belly of the bird dented and disfigured as soil spat from its side.

Eric held on to the bulkhead for dear life, recalling his previous landing, and adjusted to the pelican's sliding motion. The pelican came to a moaning halt and Eric quickly grabbed Palab and Melanie.

"You two okay?"

"Roger." Melanie sighed. "Thanks Palab."

The Grunt Messiah stood and nodded respectfully to the human female. His muscular form and rounder body gave plenty of support to cushion her fall.

Eric pulled open the ammo compartment, and passed out an Assault Rifle and shotgun to Melanie. She quickly strapped the shotgun to the back of her armor and loaded as much ammo into her pockets as possible, including magnum clips. Eric did the same, and then handed Palab two Submachine guns with several clips of ammo. The Grunt gleefully pocketed the clips and several 'bouncy' grenades.

Eric leaned toward the crumbled remains of the cockpit and looked away from the gruesome remains of the pilot; crushed between the bulkheads during the initial impact. He quickly pulled up his team list and deleted the co-pilot and pilot. He didn't even have a chance to enter their names.

Palab stepped out of the Pelican and looked skyward. Hundreds of insertion pods, escape pods, banshees, spirits, and phantoms were descending into the base. The Brutes that had escaped the kamikaze ship were entering Camp Eden without hindrance. Palab looked around and watched as panicked human marines ran around putting out fires from the crashed Brute ship, unaware or unconcerned with the impending Brute threat.

"Honorable human, Brutes come! Humans not see bad guys!"

Eric stumbled out of the Pelican and looked upward and then quickly scanned the area. "Displace, four hundred! Secure that area and prepare to form up!" Eric pointed toward a building that had been brushed by the crashing cruiser but had not fully been knocked down. Palab connected the SMG's to his belt and sprang forward onto all fours. He dashed across the grass and Melanie matched his speed. Eric opened a local broadcast on his COM. "Defensive stations! I repeat. Defensive stations! Camp Eden's shield is down and Brutes are incoming! All units form up on your command and defend your zone! Look up!"

He didn't care who heard it, so long as someone heard it. Eric watched as numerous marines stopped in their tracks and looked upward. They quickly tossed their fire gear and sprinted toward their assigned zones.

Eric nodded in approval. If only a few of the soldiers heard him then at least they could alert others. Camp Eden's upper level was in shambles, but at least they could still fight man to man. Eric sprinted after Palab, watching as several marines fell in line behind Melanie and the agile Grunt King. Melanie and Palab arrived at the building and hunkered down. The marines looked at Palab curiously, but remained silent about the obvious twist. Melanie quickly took a head count and ignored names or rank. She quickly added the additional troops to her team channel, and updated her HUD indicator Friend or Foe tags. She quickly uploaded the new 'team' to Eric's display.

Eric continued to sprint toward the group as the updated team indicators displayed on his HUD. "05, move those three marines at your six to the rear of the formation. From here, we have quick access to the proving grounds. Palab and I will take the front two Marines and go retrieve a few hogs and scorpions from the proving grounds garage. We'll make this our command bunker and expand outward. You send out a few search teams to rally more troops here. The Brutes will have to cut across this path in order to successfully break into the lower levels of the base." Eric slid into formation, took a knee, a quick breath and patted two marines on the shoulder. They quickly stood and began sprinting toward the garage area. Palab paced them, while sniffing the air for Brute soldiers.

Melanie watched as Eric's small team ran toward the far side of the proving grounds, and she then turned to three marines. "Fall to the back of the building and make sure the Brutes don't sneak up behind us." They nodded and moved out. She turned to four others, and then noticed that more and more marines were charging toward her location. Displaced troops in the area had seen them forming up inside the building and were quickly falling in to help. Melanie continuously updated the team list on her HUD. "You four, go and point out our location to anyone that looks like they've lost their squad. If you meet Covenant forces, radio in on channel four while retreating." The marine's exhaustingly nodded and broke camp. "Is anyone here from a local team?"

"I am sir." A young black marine stated. "Southern defense fire team, out of Eagle Company."

"Who's you're CO?"

The man thought for a second, obviously in shock from the chaos. "Sergeant Bradley."

"And where was your command station?" Melanie's questions came back to back; she was calm and collected. She was unaffected by the blazing inferno several hundred yards away, or the sound of distant weapons fire.

"About a half block that way." The marine pointed toward in boiling flame of buildings that were in the path of the crashing cruiser."

Melanie nodded. "You know the terrain, and your CO is most likely dead. Stick close to me and advise me of everything I need."

"Yes ma'am."

Melanie stood and zoomed outward into the distant field. Marines were cut off by a small pack of grunts and Brutes. They were taking cover inside a stable structure, while the Covenant forces danced around them with grenades and constant plasma fire.

Melanie leaned toward a marine and took his battle rifle. "You four are with me. Stay low, steady bursts of fire. Pick your targets and kill when I say fire." Melanie and her small fire team stood and jumped out of the building. They jogged forward and stayed close to Melanie's side. She held out her palm, flat to the ground, and motioned down. They all dropped to their bellies and took aim with Battle Rifles. "Head shots, gentlemen. Focus on the Brutes. It'll

take at least three hits to get through their helmets."

The Marines and Melanie were less than fifty yards away from the small pack and silently picked their targets. Melanie took aim and whispered over the COM, "Kill."

Several rounds escaped the barrels of the BR-55 battle rifles and split the heads of several Brutes. The other Brutes turned and began to growl in protest of the unknown attackers. Melanie stayed calm while the other Marines panicked and began to back away. They stood and retreated at the sight of the massive creatures turning towards them. Melanie, however, wasn't about to run. The Marines had done enough damage, she could handle the rest.

The last three brutes stampeded toward her. The first dropped as she easily put a few rounds into its skull. The second was a bit more of a challenge; its chaotic charge toward her made it harder to hit its head. The third Brute was almost on top of her so she quickly back peddled, but kept her rifle at eye level. The Brute stumbled across the ground where Melanie was laying and a perfectly timed grenade detonated beneath its feet. It roared in pain, but was quickly silenced by a perfectly fired three round burst. Melanie calmly reloaded and charged toward the pinned down marines. After clearing the last of the Covenant Allied Grunts, she raced to the building and dived inside. She was greeted by several magnum barrels.

She stood and addressed the men. "Red Squad, out of Camp Charley. Move your unit to our command bunker, one hundred yards East." The soldiers were exhausted and looked as though they had been running since the moment the ship crashed. She couldn't blame them for being a little disoriented. She quickly looked out of a window and pointed to where they needed to go. The men nodded and jogged exhaustingly toward the established command center. They were slow, and Melanie couldn't wait for them. She scanned the area for hostiles and sprinted ahead. She climbed back into her position as the Marines that had retreated from her side hunkered down; nervous that she was about to rip them a new hole.

She wanted to say something but these men and women were new recruits, and most hadn't seen combat. Most of the experienced vets were on the front line or dead.

She patted them on the shoulder and stood up. "Alright, I need you to scatter outside and begin building a perimeter defense around the entrance door to the lower level of the camp. The door is sealed to prevent anyone from entering, and we'll be the guards that make sure nothing gets below." Melanie looked out of the window at the massive side crawling doors, made from solid ship-grade Titanium-A, which led to the lower levels of the camp. "I want gun turrets stationed all along that road, with barricades and trigger activated mines. Get up maggots, the core ain't paying us by the hour!" The marines stood and began to move about the area, gathering stones, vehicles and anything else they could use to make barricades.

Meanwhile, Eric leveled his assault rifle and fired on the run. He mowed down a Brute that was attempting to reload its Brute shot while jackals calmly packed together in the distance. Eric took a knee as more marines filed into the garage. "Gas up the hogs! We'll need the speed! Leave the tanks for later!" Several marines stumbled from the darkness of the garage and joined into the resistance. Everywhere

they went, dislocated marine fire teams would crawl from their hiding spots and join in on the battle. Camp Eden was crawling with human support, and the crashing Brute ship obviously did less damage to their morale than he thought.

Outside the garage, Brute piloted ghosts began to streak around the area as Palab eagle eyed the outer perimeter. "Ghosts!" He shouted as he stumbled back into the garage.

Several marines took aim at Palab but Eric reacted quickly. "Stand down! He's one of us!" Eric stood by his side and waved the Marines forward. He then spotted several Mongoose ATVs in the corner. "Perfect. Three ATVs, I need runners." Eric pointed out six marines. "Use your speed and provide cover. Everyone else, mount up on the hogs and let's clear the parade ground of hostiles."

"Sir, sniper rifles are in this crate." A marine shouted from a distant corner.

Eric turned to the marine. "Load them up in a transport hog, get them over to our command bunker. Get the best shooters onto the roof and start picking off Brutes. Do not fire on any Elites."

"Sir?" The marine questioned. "An alien is an alien, right? We have to fight for our own!"

Eric lowered his rifle and stood toe-to-toe with the insubordinate marine. "I don't like them any more than you do. But I won't turn my back to a helping hand. The Elites are here to help, and we can't win this alone."

"Yes Sir." The marine frowned. Palab heard the conversation and didn't understand what Eric meant by not liking the Elites. In Palab's eyes, Eric had always seemed fine with the Sangheili warriors, but perhaps there was more that he wasn't aware of.

"In coming!" A marine screamed. A ghost accelerated into the garage and the brute fired wildly into the packs of humans and vehicles. Palab jumped into the path of the speeding vehicle and the pounced on board as it streaked toward him.

"Traitorous Unggoy!" The Brute snarled. He began to steer frantically; attempting to shake off the tiny grunt. The marines in the garage ran toward the Ghost and took aim, ready to fire.

"Hold your fire!" Eric shouted. "He can handle this." Everyone was amazed at Eric's words. A lone Grunt against a Brute was not something to joke about. But they obeyed their orders. "Get those ATV's outside and finish prepping the gear!"

Palab clung to the front of the ghost, waiting for an opportunity. The Brute grew frustrated and raised his spike rifle but Palab was a step ahead of him. The tiny Grunt gripped the edge of the ghost's control panel, and pulled himself forward. He kicked the gun from the Brutes hand and planted his other hoof on its lap. He then jammed his long thumb claws through the Brute helmet's eye holes; embedding them into the roaring creature's eyes. Blood began to trickle down Palab's arms as the Brute grabbed him. Palab pulled his thumbs out, and extended his left elbow spike. With his right hand he removed the Brute's helmet, all while struggling to keep the creature's hands off

of him, and then jammed his left spike into the exposed meaty tissue of its neck. The Brute gargled as he quickly bled-out from the trauma and Palab powered down the ghost. He kicked the Brute out of the ghost and turned to the marines.

"Honorable human. Me lead attack. Give time for vehicles to be loaded." Palab sat and waited for a reply as the Marines simply gazed in shock.

A dumbfounded marine questioned. "What the hell just happened?"

"Sergeant Palab just gave you an order, Private!" Eric snapped. "ATV teams, follow Palab's orders to the letter. Get those hogs out of here!" The three ATV rumbled to life. The driver straddled the ATV and throttled it while a secondary shooter clung to the rear. They all speed out of the garage behind Palab. As they sped ahead, a group of ghosts began to charge back at them.

A marine holding on to an ATV asked his driver. "How do we know which ghosts not to shoot?"

"Mate, if you see a Brute at the wheel, kill it!"

Eric and his hogs quickly pulled out of the garage a few moments later and made their way toward the bunker. Eric pulled his assault rifle close to his shoulder as his driver plowed toward the Jackals that had huddled out of range. He fired pulses toward them, knowing that it was useless; his rounds safely bounced off their shields. However, the jackals were so confused about the weapons fire that they didn't move from the warthog's path. All six hogs plowed into the Jackals, crushing them and purposefully chasing stragglers as they passed by.

Eric tapped his COM. "Palab, we are clear. Return to the Bunker."

"Me coming." Palab replied. He spun his ghost and fired into a Brute as it tossed a spike grenade toward him. The Brute was blown away by the super heated plasma but his grenade successfully stuck to the ghost. Palab rolled out of the seat as the weapon exploded; destroying the ghost and sending angled spikes into the opposite direction. He stood up and shook the shock from himself and waved toward a marine. "Retreat back to bunker!"

"Right!" The driver shouted. "What about you?"

"Me follow." Palab dashed out on all fours and sprinted toward the bunker.

The two marines on the ATV watched in amazement as the Grunt ran in a style that he didn't think Grunts could do. "What the hell? Did you know Grunts could do that?"

"Man, why are you asking me?" The gunner replied. "A grunt just gave me an order to retreat. I'm still trying to understand that!"

"Good point, mate." The driver replied. He turned the ATV and streaked toward the bunker as the other two ATV's followed. They quickly passed Palab as the Grunt Messiah moved as fast as he could

to the area where the honorable human had established command. As he approached the bunker he smelled something familiar and he slowed down. He stood and looked back as two bloodied Sangheili's struggled to free themselves from a crashed escape pod.

"Honorable human! Me find Lieutenant Simyaldee!"

- - - - -

The warthog transport pulled into the command bunker as hundreds of marines began to solidify the defenses around the main gate to the lower levels. Sniper rounds echoed on the upper levels of the building as Eric and Palab assisted Simyaldee and Gridolee out of the truck. Simyaldee could barely support himself; his wounds were severe. Gridolee was exhausted but not in any immediate danger from his wounds. The marines near the parked hogs watched in amazement as Eric shouldered Simyaldee's arms and guided him into the building, while Palab and Gridolee followed.

Melanie approached. "Defenses are coming up nicely. I've fortified the area, protecting that door is our main priority."

"Any COM traffic from inside the base?" Eric asked.

"None yet, but I'm sure they are on radio silence."

Eric laid Simyaldee in a corner of the lower level stairwell and turned to Melanie. "Get something big and heavy and start banging on the door, use Mors code. Let them know we're human."

"On it." Melanie looked down at Simyaldee as the wounded warrior struggled to stay conscious. "Is he going to make it?"

Eric looked down at him as he examined the wounds. "I don't know." Melanie walked out. Eric turned to Palab. "Contact the Elder, tell him that we need a field medic inside the camp, now."

"We no have field medics." Palab replied. "Sangheili only train in healing themselves."

"Basic field kit knowledge." Eric frowned. Like the average marine, the Sangheili were also only trained in personal medical kit basics, but Simyaldee was well beyond that, and they did not have a medic in their squad. He needed surgery, badly. "Contact him and tell him the situation. And advise him on our location." Palab nodded and powered on his COM. Eric turned back to Simyaldee. "Stay awake."

"I am aware of that." Simyaldee slurred.

"Did this happen in the crash, or were you jumped by a gang of Brutes?"

"No. It was a Sharquoi."

Eric paused in shock. He took off his helmet and wiped his brow. His eyes were stretched wide like he had seen a ghost.

"A Sharquoi? A Sharquoi did this to you? The Brutes have them?"

"I am afraid so." Simyaldee coughed. "Do not fear. It is

dead."

"Yeah, but if they have one, I'm sure they have more." Eric sat back against the wall. "Palab, did you get through to the Elder?"

"He coming. He say troops are at gate now."

"Take some marines and meet him." Eric ordered.

"Me hurry." Palab waddled out of the building and signaled for several marines to follow.

"Sir, the Brutes are rallying their numbers on the western side of the parade grounds." A marine shouted from a few floors up.

Eric stood and pulled on his helmet. "Gridolee, watch him. Make sure he stays awake."

Gridolee leaned against the wall and held his wounds. "I will. Honorable Humanâ€¦ Sergeant Raynord. I have something for you." Gridolee unclipped a brute satchel from his belt and handed it to Eric.

"What is it?" The bag was covered in blood.

"I promised you that the next time we meet, I would bring an offering of peace between you and my family."

Eric smiled from behind his helmet as he instantly recalled the discussion. "The head of Prophet." Eric opened it and palmed the football sized object. There was very little blood thanks partially to the searing heat of the Mirrator'd blade, and the sheer terror in the Prophet's eyes almost made Eric want to laugh. Some would have found the display sickening, but Eric embraced the raw ancestral gesture. "Thanks. I'll be sure to mount it on my trophy case."

Eric placed it back in the bag and put it on a pile of supplies. "Marines form up on me. We need to push those Brutes back."

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Ark Excavation site // Mombasa observatory
> ONI Facility Bravo A-11092G: The Gatekeeper
 November 3, 2552

> Several hours later.<p>

The Colonel stood as the screen flashed to life. The static filled image of a man in an all white uniform appeared on screen.

"Rear Admiralâ€¦" The colonel began to speak.

"Ackerson?" The admiral sternly cut in. "What the hell are you doing there? Where is Major Rawlings?"

"We don't know Sir." The young Private spoke.

The static image of the man was silent for a moment as he examined a data pad. "You must be Private Wesley Williams. When were you pulled off of Red Squad? You were ordered to stay with the Black Ops."

"Major Rawlings reassigned me, Rear Admiral."

The Admiral sighed. "Very well. All present, do you conquer with the decision of HighCOM and UNSCDF's proposal for an all conditions surrender to the Covenant?"

"No." Wesley stated.

"No." Ackerson added.

"No." The Admiral stated.

"No." Several other voices on the screen agreed."

The Rear Admiral sighed deeply. "Without confirmation from Admiral Hood, we still stand at four of five votes."

"Just five, sir?" Wesley questioned.

"Most of the Brass was hit pretty hard. The Brutes broke into HighCOM two hours ago. We lost a lot of good officers today. We are all that's left."

The room fell silent but then a voice stated from the video feed background. "I have made contact, Sir."

"Put that bastard on the screen."

The rear admiral looked up on his display as Wesley turned on his display to the same channel. The image quickly presented itself as the Prophet of Truth glared downward at a low sitting camera. He made himself appear larger than he already was, his red robe and elaborate headdress merely adding to his confident gloat.

"Hello humans." Truth smoothly spoke in human tongue. "I find this most awkward that you would seek an audience with me. But I will listen to your words if only to amuse my troops."

"Truth, my name is Rear Admiral Rich, and we, along with the human forces around the world, have decided that we will not surrender to your occupation forces. We will fight to the very end."

Truth seemed puzzled as he tilted his head in thought. "Forgive me, human, but I do not recall ever offering you a chance to surrender. The glory of the Covenant has overwhelmed your planet in four days. We have found the sacred artifact of our Gods, and as we speak, my ships are removing from the tainted soil that you humans walk upon. Any decision you make are for nothing. You will pay for your crimes against the Gods. By the mighty hands of the Covenant you shall all be wiped from the face of the galaxy."

Admiral Rich spoke up. "We will not roll over so easily, Truth! Soon, even your forces will understand that you are a maniacal madman! The Elites have already learned of your lies, and soon the rest of the Covenant will know."

"The Elites were merely our lapdogs. As they have been since the time of the Forerunners. Keep them. We will crush them as well as you. You will not stop the Great Journey, humans. You will be consumed by

it."

"We will stop you."

"There is not one amongst you that would dare to approach me. Not one! None of you humans can resist the power of the Covenant. You have lost. Hide all you want. Stay buried in your small caves. I do not fear your HighCOM or what ships remain in orbit. You are defeated. You have lost. And the Great Journey is near!" The screen faded and Truth rubbed his face in thought. He turned to his Brute Guards and marveled at the awesome power of his army.

"Your holiness." A brute captain spoke. "We have confirmed that the Prophet of Signs ship has crashed."

"Was the Tree of Life found?"

"Records indicate that they were very close to finding it. The last course placed them directly over the Tree of Life's possible location."

"Then the humans have established a worthy defensive over it." Truth thought to himself. "Very well. Send seven of our rear guard ships to the crash sight; a full attack wave. When the Tree of Life is secure, destroy it."

"Destroy it?" The Brute Captain questioned in surprise. "It is a sacred artifact."

"Yes, but an artifact that has been tainted by the humans. Trust my words, Captain. Nothing good will come of something that has been tainted by the humans." The Brute Captain bowed as he returned to his post.

Truth folded his hands across his face, covering his mouth, and he smiled.

****To be continued.****

12. the Edge of Madness

****Level 12: the Edge of Madness****

Camp Eden
> November 8, 2552<p>

For five days the Marines of Camp Eden fought off numerous assaults by the Covenant, with the aid of Elite and Grunt forces. The Brute's repeatedly attacked in waves, pushing with everything they could muster, but the Allied forces of humanity and the Elites held strong. They had created a defensible position and between attacks they all rested.

Eric stepped across a coolant feed from a nearby plasma mortar cannon, stolen from the Brutes front line several days ago. Steam vented from a leak in the line, but Eric ignored it. He emerged from the thick white steam like some mythical character from ancient tales of English lore. Yet upon his shoulder he did not brandish a silver sword of metal or iron, instead he held a heavy rifle made from

composite materials which was a dark slab of grey and black. He walked proudly around the camp of resting soldiers as explosions rattle in the distance. The few soldiers that were awake saluted him as he past and he loosely returned the gesture to them.

In front of him stood the massive bronze painted door leading into the heart of the lower levels of Camp Eden. It was always shut, only opening to release more support and vehicles. This was Melanie's sector; she was left in full command of the door. Melanie had nearly two hundred men under her command, mostly novice foot soldiers and the occasional ODS, all raw recruits and terrified. Any man or woman with experience was sent to the forward area where Eric was in command and his troops faced the full brunt of all of the Brute assaults.

Eric approached a medical tent sitting next to the lower level entrance street, and walked inside. There where several wounded marines resting on tables as medics examined them, but he motioned toward the back and looked down at Melanie's unmoving form. From behind her mask Eric could easily tell that she was asleep, yet chances are she would snap to attention at the first sign of trouble. Although there was distant weapons fire, things were quiet, and this was a good time for her to rest. He didn't blame her. Eric cautiously placed his rifle to the side and sat beside her.

A medic approached. "Sir, do you need any attention?"

Melanie snapped awake and responded, "No, I'm fine." She then saw Eric sitting at her side. "Ohâ€¦ 19, I didn't knowâ€¦"

"Go back to sleep." Eric sighed as he leaned his head against a crate. Melanie looked at his dusty armor, and the mixture of alien blood and dirt. Neither of them removed their helmets, there was no need to, they were more comfortable with it on, and it allowed them to jump into combat more quickly.

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. "Who is in command of the forward guard?" She questioned on a closed frequency.

"08." Eric mumbled. "Simyaldee is still finally stable, but Palab and Gridolee are there to assist 08 if things get hairy. Not to mention the rest of those Mirratord."

"Hard to believe Simyaldee is still alive after all he's been through." Melanie added. "Five days and he's still kicking. We do need him, though. What are you doing back here in my neck of the woods?"

"Halsey is on her way up for another Air reading. She wants to show me something."

"I know you like older women, but isn't she a bit too old for you?"

"Shut up, and get some rest." Eric sighed as he elbowed Melanie playfully.

She thought for a second and rolled her head over and looked toward Eric. "How much longer will our luck last?"

Eric chuckled. "I don't think there's a mathematician alive that can answer that one."

Melanie laughed but quickly fell silent. She closed the private channel and went to sleep in the blink of an eye. She was completely exhausted, hungry, even though she had just eaten, and her mind was on constant alert. Though her eyes were closed, her ears remained sharp. She could hear every sound made in the tent, though some sounds she ignored; like the scuffing of combat boots and the swishing of rubbing fabric. She only focused on the unheard sounds, screaming marines and weapons fire, the kind of sounds that would signal trouble.

Eric was in the same state, yet something more was wrapped in his unconscious mind. What was Rose doing, and where was she going?

Time slipped away and before Eric had realized it he had been asleep for nearly an hour. His COM buzzed to life. _"Black Ops 19, this is Halsey. Do you read me?"_

"Loud and clear." He moaned. Eric adjusted to stand but quickly paused. Melanie had leaned her head onto his shoulder and he froze upon feeling her pressed against his shoulder. His sudden movement woke her, however, and she quickly stood up; attempting to ignore the position she was in.

"_I'm nearly done with the air scan. Are you ready?"_ Halsey signaled.

Eric stood and watched Melanie stretch. "Roger that. I'll be at the gate in a few seconds." Melanie turned her back to him, picked up her rifle and motioned toward the tent exit. Eric had known her long enough to realize that she was uncomfortable about what had just happened.

Eric grabbed his rifle, and followed her out of the tent. "08 knows that he needs to contact me if things get out of hand at the forward guard. Stay on the active channel and monitor the front, only assist if you need to."

Melanie kept walking to her post and replied, "roger that," without turning to face him. As Eric turned toward the massive gate he watched as several Grunt packs waddled through the human guards at the door. Over the past five days, the Grunts had grown weary of simply keeping watch and had taken it upon themselves, with Palab's permission, to explore the human defenses. This was helpful on two levels because it allowed the Grunts to interact more with the humans and to let the humans visually recognize that not all of the Grunts had sided with the Brutes.

Eric entered the maintenance door of the tunnel. This was the only door that was open at all times, for troops to come and go as they pleased, but it was also heavily guarded. Behind the door sat rows of tents, medical teams, vehicles and mobile weapons. He ignored it all and made his way to a table with a woman in a white lab coat. Her warm face greeted him as he approached.

"Sergeant." The elderly woman stated as she turned toward Eric. Even through his modified ODST armor she easily recognized him. Several Marines and Naval officers saluted him as he past.

"Dr. Halsey." Eric stated as he saluted.

"Everyday we do this. I'm not an officer. You don't have to address me." She calmly replied as she examined an air sample.

"What's the verdict?" Eric questioned as he examined a data pad sitting on the doctors work station.

"Five days of scanning, and five negative signs. The air is clean. Don't worry, we won't have a repeat of Dorenth this time. As far as I can tell, there are no Flood Spores in the air. The fire from the ship must have burned them off."

"Good to know." Eric stated. He then noticed that Doctor Halsey was starring at him. "Ma'am?"

"Nothing. You simply remind me of him." She calmly stated as she began to clean up her equipment.

"Who?"

Halsey looked at Eric and smiled softly before returning her eyes to her work station. "John."

"The Master Chief?" Eric questioned. "We have nothing in common, only that he's the reason I signed on to the Enhanced Marine Program; my youthful dreams to be a Spartan." The EMP was the cover-up name for the highly illegal testing done on Eric and his friends; making them into the augmented Spartans that they are now.

"And you became one, though I'm sure the process was quiet painful. But none the less, you have a calming sense of leadership. You are steady under fire. Your soldiers rally behind you with quiet awe." Catherine stated as she looked past Eric at the few Marines who were watching him, studying his modified armor. "and you have an uncanny amount of luck. That's what you remind me of him. Aside from John, you and your Black Ops have seen an amazing amount of combat in the past month. But here you are, still alive. You survived the destruction of New Mombasa, a direct assault on a Covenant cruiser, and the destruction of Dorenth. You managed to help save the majority of the Elite populace, rescue a derelict Forerunner space craft, and now you are the lone guardian of the world's largest civilian stronghold which also doubles as the secret location of the Tree of Life." Doctor Halsey loaded her box of tools into a warthog and turned to Eric with a reassuring smile; a motherly sense of comfort. She climbed into the passenger's seat as Eric walked up and climbed into the driver's seat. They slowly maneuvered past all of the heavy weaponry and creates lined up in the street. Eric then steered toward the two empty lanes and sped down the long road.

After nearly a half-hour of driving, the lower level city of Camp Eden opened up before them. The cave ceiling vanished in a thick haze. Thin clouds swept overhead as pelican's crisscrossed the sky; shuttling VIPs and military brass to distance locations in the massive cavern..

Eric drove into an unpopulated section of the town and accelerated through the streets. This area was once populated by marine forces, but once the upper level became a war zone, many of the troops and

supplies were sent topside. Civilians, however, were still confined to the cramped civilian districts. He neared a tower which was highly decorated with UNSC and UEG flags, numerous vehicles were set up as display statues from wars past, and the letters O N I were massively displayed on the center of the building. They neared a side gate and three ONI officers approached the vehicle as Eric came to a stop.

The lead guard saluted Doctor Halsey and nodded toward Eric. "You can step out of the Vehicle, Sergeant. I'll drive the Doctor the rest of the way."

Doctor Halsey leaned toward Eric and whispered in his ear. "Even Section III security is unaware of you. You are quiet the enigma." She smiled. She was referring to the man's lack of knowledge of who Eric really was.

Eric turned to the soldier. "My clearance permits me access, Private."

"Sir, forgive me. But ODS are not permitted onto base."

Eric huffed. "Senior Chief Petty Officer, Eric Raynord. Call sign; Black Ops One Nine. Service number; Delta, Zero, Delta, Black, four seven two nine."

An Officer with a data pad entered the name and service number. He cocked an eyebrow and passed the pad to the head officer. The officer who had addressed Eric gazed at the file in pure confusion. Eric's name was displayed with a list of clearances that the young man never knew existed. At the top of the file were the words 'Black Operations A Sigma One'; and all access security clearance. The young man's heart skipped. Eric's spreadsheet contained information of nearly everything he had done in the past fifteen years, including his awkward demotion from Lieutenant to Sergeant. Such a demotion was unheard of, but then again Eric never lost his security clearance.

And to add further confusion to his Black Operations class, Eric had the title of Sergeant and Senior Chief; he was both a Marine and a Navy officer.

The Oni security officer was baffled, but understood that this man was far more important than he could ever imagine. "Sir, yes sir! Forgive my assumptions, sir! I was unaware!" He quickly placed a bright yellow sticker on the Hogs front window; permission to go anywhere on base. "Sir, before you go. There is an attached file to your profile, marked by Major Rawlings and for your eyes only."

Eric took the data pad and removed his left glove and helmet. He pressed his thumb to the pad and his eye above the retinal scanner. Instead of taking a simple thumbprint, the data pad took a microscopic blood sample and checked his DNA. The retinal scan and DNA matches were confirmed and the data file was uploaded into Eric's ODS systems. He pulled on his helmet and drove into the base. He neared the main entrance and parked as he accessed the data file.

A message appeared on his HUD.

//command structureArklnodeB47134//

> â€|executeâ€|
 From: Major Elizabeth Rawlings // Head of AFT Research

> To: Senior Chief Petty Officer Eric Raynord / Black Ops 19_

Start Fileâ€|â€|â€|

"_If you've made it this far, Raynord, then I assume you are on your way into the Box. Seeing that Santos is now under my care, I can only assume you are traveling with Halsey or another member of my staff. If you are on your own, then your clearance commands will allow you a 24 hour window into the Box starting the moment you access this file.

_

"_The Ark is not what you think it is. It is not what anyone thinks it is. It can only be describes as a last resort. It is composed of "two" objects: a Forerunner ship, which landed here 100,000 years ago, and a manufactured weapon. Carbon analyses are inconclusive on both of the objects. We don't know which came first. The ship, which is nearly identical to the size of a small Covenant cruiser, was what we believe landed on Earth first. We have evidence that the second Ark structure was perhaps built many years later. The Ark's main systems will not tell us any specific details. However, we do know that at some point the Ark ship eventually moved and docked with the Ark structure which was built on this planet. _

"_Raynord, the Ark has a two fold purpose; life and death. Humanity was saved once, but it will not be saved again. The second structure was built primarily as a weapon, a powerful weapon designed to do more then simply control the Halo Instillations. We are not clear on that purpose, as again, the Ark systems would not tell us. However, this is why the Tree of Life is so important._

"_The Tree of Life is a central hub, a data node, of all knowledge stored by the Ark. You have seen them before on different worlds, recovered by the Covenant. Those are not from the Ark. They are leftover data nodes from Forerunner ships. Each Forerunner ship has a Crystal, often called 'the Luminous Key' by Covenant forces. If a Luminous Key is discarded, it acts like a giant sponge and absorbs as much knowledge as it can; a learning database. The more it learns the more it grows. The Tree of Life is the Ark's core crystalâ€| Earth's crystal._

"_The fragment you were in charge of guarding was the heart of the Tree of Life, a small portion that was removed 100,000 years ago. However, we learned long ago that only the heart of the tree can be reinserted into the Ark. This is why it was crucial to regain possession of it. The Tree of Life can continue to thrive without its heart, and it also contains all of its data, but no other pieces from the Tree can be used to power the Ark._

"_This is why I returned your clearance, Raynord. You must protect the Tree of Life. I hate to assign you with such a task, but there isn't anyone left at Camp Eden who is remotely capable of achieving this. I reactivated Siren, she is attempting to access the Ark Data Node and retrieve as much intel as she can about the Second Ark Structure.. Protect it until she has completed her task. We must Reclaim what we lost, Raynord. This goes beyond the war, the Prophets and the Flood. Protect the Tree of Life until Siren has had a chance to unlock its secrets."_

//runtimeexecuteendoffline// file purged from record.

Eric sat back and pondered what he had just read. "We must reclaim what we once lost?"

"What?" Doctor Halsey stated as she stood beside Eric. Eric climbed out of the hog and began to follow the doctor into the building. He informed her of what Major Rawlings had just told him via the file as they descended into the box.

"I see. So the crystal is able to create a storage bank for its data." Halsey stated as she exited the elevator.

"That's the way it seems."

"No wonder the Covenant has been searching for them all over the galaxy. They power ships, alter time, respond to hostile intent, and collect data from its surroundings. The crystal is basically a small wonder tool. Has there been any sign of the one that we lost? The Earth's Crystal?"

"You mean the one I lost." Eric countered. "I'm not sure."

"You're not?" A voice echoed on the speakers. Eric instantly recognized the voice. "I thought I told you?"

"Siren?" Eric questioned.

"The one and only." She laughed. "Did you miss me?"

"A smart AI is always a handy tool." Eric grinned.

"A tool?" Siren questioned. "No mater. 19, what is the status on the upper level? I can not access any of the above ground remote cameras."

"The Brutes are pushing, but we're keeping them at bay."

"Threat level to the Box?" Siren questioned.

"For now it's minimal."

Halsey folded her arms. "How long have you been active, Siren?"

"Forgive me Doctor, I am not at liberty to say. You may both enter." The door parted and Eric and Doctor Halsey proceeded into the outer cave. On the far side of the room was a large black wall; the Box.

Halsey questioned. "Gibson was online this morning. What happened to him?"

"I deleted him. He was a bore, and very cryptic."

Catherine paused in thought. "Who gave you permission to do that?"

"Permission?" Siren questioned. "I don't understand what you mean. I

needed access to the Box and Camp Eden, he was in my way" so I deleted him. I have his primary data node on file if you need him. But I did not see a problem with removing him. He was a none sentient life form, an AI, like myself. He was hindering my research."

"Are you still studying the Tree of Life?" Halsey questioned.

"It is very fascinating Doctor. It has a wealth of knowledge dating back to the rise of humanity. Human history" so very fascinating."

"Then I guess I have my work cut out for me once again." Catherine sat at a terminal and began to examine the data that Siren had uncovered so far. "Sergeant, feel free to look around."

Eric was already walking about the cave. Examining stone pillars, carvings, and skeleton remains. "Elites?" He stated as he brushed the dirt from a fossilized skull.

Siren spoke over the intercom. "This cave was created when the Ark first landed on Earth, at the conclusion of the firing of Halo. There was no life on Earth. The two Reclaimer Generals, Litran and Bitran, built this shrine is a testament to their lost allies. The Elites were amongst the closest friends humanity had within the Forerunner Empire."

"But this skull, how did it get here?"

Halsey continued to gaze at her video display, but answered the question. "Before the firing of Halo, Earth was a research station. The Elites, species 005, were the head of the Forerunner military before humanity was assimilated into the Empire. They protected the Forerunners that visited Earth and studied humans. Most likely Litran or Bitran found an old Sangheili tomb and brought the remains here" in order to hide the past."

Eric continued to look about the room and walked toward the Box. As he approached he heard Doctor Halsey groan at a sudden discovery.

"It was lie." She gasped. Catherine pushed her seat back and seemed to look out into nothingness as she pondered what she had just read. "Earth was not destroyed by a second moon. The Forerunners lied"

"Yes doctor." Siren added. "They lied in order to save us. The Keeper of the Seed Ship told us that our home world was destroyed by a crashing moon. This event did happen, but not on Earth."

"Mars, that happened on Mars." Catherine ran her finger through her hair as an image of Mars appeared on the screen. The picture of Mars was overlapped by a historical image of Mars before its moon fell. Mars was filled with lakes and reservoirs, a beautiful green world.

Siren added. "The event that took place on Mars threatened the stability of Earth. It was feared that Mars would be knocked off of its orbit, and sent into Earth's path. For safety, the Forerunner removed humanity from Earth."

Eric turned toward Doctor Halsey. "So the Forerunners covered up this little incident, but from who?"

Siren continued. "It has been speculated that the Law Keepers would not be happy with their replacements into the higher class of the Empire. The Forerunners were well aware of how powerful the Law Keepers had become so theyâ€¦" Siren paused. "I find this hard to believe."

Eric folded his arms. "Don't hold out on us now."

Siren continued. "In order to hide Earth from the Law Keepers, the Forerunners destroyed Earth. They left the planet barren, killing off nearly all of its remaining life; obliterating the surface of the planet from Orbit. They built the Ark ship several hundred years later with the set purpose of rebuilding Earth and controlling the Halos."

Eric leaned against the wall. "They hid all traces of humanities past, and then dumped us in the one place they new the Law Keepers would never look."

Siren softly replied, almost saddened by the news. "Yes. That is why the Prophets never expected that this planet was our actual home world. For 100,000 years, humanity has been safe."

Halsey stood from her table and glared toward the box. "What have we done?" She questioned aloud. "The last Reclaimers knew that the Prophets would retain their memories. Litran and Bitran knew that the Forerunners had been fooled by the Law Keepers; the Prophets. The Prophets have been looking for the Ark for 100,000 years and now they have it. The Reclaimers chose to forget the Empire in order to protect the safety of the Universe."

Siren spoke suddenly. "It was called the Path of Reclamation." She stated directly. "Reclaimers must become the head of the New Empire. Reclaimers must rebuild their military might. Reclaimers must reclaim the lost tools of the Forerunners. The war is not over. The Flood are not dead. Reclaimers must rebuild, reequip, retake what was once lost. The Empire rests on your shoulders, Reclaimers. Only you can save the Universe from the outbreak. We shall build you a weaponâ€¦ a weapon of last resort. It will be hidden, safe from the eyes of the universe. But if you need it, you will find it, the Ark will find it."

Doctor Halsey walked closer to Eric as she listened to Siren. "A weapon? That must be the Ark Structure which was built on Earth."

Siren continued. "We must reclaim what we once lost. We must correct the mistakes of the past. Reclaimers, it is with you that we leave this task. When the Empire has returned, and the threat destroyed, we will returnâ€¦ we shall regain our glory."

Eric gasped. "We must reclaim what we once lost? That's what Major Rawlings said."

Siren added. "Yes, the 'Path of Reclamation' was one of the first documents recovered from the Tree of Life. Major Rawlings, apparently, is a firm believer in it."

Eric's COM filled with a static burst and two clicks. "Siren, boost the signal on my COM." After a second the transmission cleared. "Say again!"

"_19, heavy Brute ground supports have begun to push against us. I'm calling for support from the second line. They've got three scarabs are inbound, numerous high speed ground units. Looks like Truth is tired of toying with us."_

"Copy that 08. We knew this was coming. Power up the energy drainer mine field. I'm on my way top side. 05, you copy that?"

"_Roger. I'm splitting my guard detail and moving the big guns to the front line."_

"I'll be there as soon as I can. 19 out." Eric turned to Doctor Halsey, nodded and ran toward the Elevator.

Halsey watched him vanish into the elevator and she sighed softly. "Siren."

"Yes Doctor?"

"Is there a way to create a copy of the Ark Data Node, without the Ark key?"

Siren chuckled. "Funny you should ask."

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Eric couldn't see what was going on, but he had to keep his ears in the game. He opened his COM channel to listen in on the above ground combat. He had a long way to go, and he wanted to be fully aware of what to expect when he got there.

Eric's COM was filled with the outcries of frantic marines, mostly raw recruits that were still green from boot. In situations where the enemy has your back to a wall and there was no place to run to, you had to keep your wits sharp. That was not what Eric was hearing over the line.

The elevator opened at Eric broke into a full sprint toward the outer door of the ONI facility building. He sprinted across the lot, jumped into the driver's seat and throttled out of the gate.

What he was hearing on his COM was sheer madness.

"_Incoming!"_

"_Eat this and die!"_

"_Where's the blockade?"_

"_Hell if I know!"_

"_Chief what the hell is that?"_

"_Shoot it and shut up!"_

"_Hold the ranks! Form up, damn it!"_

"_We just lost the mongoose patrol! Where the hell is the mine field?"_

"_Will you shut up?"_

An explosion vibrated over the COM. Screams of pain filled the line and then there was silence. Eric switched the channel and listened to another line.

"_Foxtrot just got wiped out! Holy shit!"_

"_Got another one! I am bad ass!"_

"_Why in the hell are you counting? We'll be dead soon enoughâ€¦| Jesus those things are huge!"_

"_Stupid Brute!"_

"_Get him off meâ€¦|" _

"_Breach! They broke through! Kill it! Kill it!" _

The blood curling shriek of a man screaming in pain echoed into Eric's ear, and behind his screams he could hear the ferocious roar of a Brute. He switched the channel. "08, 05, pull them together! The Brutes are using a confusion tactics and trying to out muscle you."

"_We know, 19!"_ Melanie replied in a frantic shout. _"They're trying to setup a gunnery line and using infantry to confuse us. There is simply too many of them!"_

"Where's the Mirratord?"

"_Gridolee has them sneaking toward the gunnery line." Mathew replied. "But in all the confusion, it may not be enough!"_

"Hold out for as long as you can." Eric drove out of the military district and onto the main road back toward the main entrance. At full speed, it would take him thirty minutes to get topside. He knew it was a risk leaving the troops, but he didn't imagine that the Brutes would press this hard after five days of constant assaults.

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The room was silent as Melanie leaned over the campfire. "What was it that Kim always said? Oh yeah! If there is something big in the way, and you can't beat it, shoot it. She would sit on the obstacle course during boot and literally stare at the climbing wall. She could never climb that thing. Well one day she decided that she wasn't going to lose to the wall. So out of the blue she pulled out a shotgun and blew holes in it. I mean, our drill instructor stood there, mouth agape, staring at her like she was insane. They called the MPs to take her in, but they didn't even try to get close to her while she was holding the shotgun.

"She unloaded round after round, until the hole was big enough for

her to climb through. And after she climbed through it she had this huge smile on her face. I laughed so hard I nearly peed my pants. She then quietly flipped on the safety, placed the shotgun in the dirt, got down on her knees and put her hands behind her head. The MPs tackled her and put her in handcuffs."

The room burst into laughter as Melanie dried her tears of laughter. "But wait, it gets better. Okay, my sister is slightly shorter than me and much more curvy, so you have to understand that we are different. I mean, you've all seen her. She's hot! We do look alike, but Kim is by far the more girly of us. Her boobs are huge. She got lucky in that department."

"Your boobs are fine, Mel." Eric laughed. Melanie smiled, but elbowed him for saying it. Kim sat quietly in the corner and buried her face in shame.

"Anyway," Melanie continued. "As the MP tackled her, while she's wearing her training fatigues, she slides face first into the dirt. She was already on her knees with her hands behind her head, so when she hits the ground it was face and chest first. The MP shackles her and sits her up, and there they are—two huge bare breasts staring at the world!" More laughter erupts into the room as most of the guys lean in to hear more.

Kim sighed in the corner. "Nobody wants to hear this, Mel."

Melanie laughed. "Shut up!" She then continued. "So as she's sitting there, bare breasted and covered in dirt. The MP is torn on what to do next. So, my sister, who eventually becomes our team leader, leans backward toward the MP and says 'could you pull up my shirt? I'm cold.' The MP stupidly reaches down, grabs her shirt and pulls it up and over her female attributes. As he is doing so, Mel starts screaming! The MP has no idea what's going on, until about five seconds later when Mel says, he's groping me! And that's how she avoided being kicked out of the core, three weeks into boot camp!"

"Are you serious?" Sammy, a young Korean girl, questioned. "You used the sexual assault card after destroying a wall?"

Kim shrugged. "The core has always been shaky with female soldiers. I scream sexual assault, and the media would have had a field day. I apologized to the drill Sergeant for destroying the wall, and the MP basically wanted to forget that anything ever happened. So just like that, the whole incident vanished."

Melanie jumped up and ran toward her older sister. "Should I tell them how you also slept with the drill sergeant?"

Kim roared in protest. "I never slept with him! What the hell is wrong with you?"

Eric sat in the corner, laughing out loud while Sammy, Mathew, Roy, Justin and the rest of the Black Ops huddled around laughing at the two sisters' playful antics. Melanie stood up and began to dance around the fire, content with life, and content with the moment—surrounded by friends, family, and the happiness that was her team.

Melanie, Black Ops 05, snapped back to reality, and as she sat up her helmet loosely fell to the side. Blood dripped from an open wound on her head as explosions sounded and plasma bolts sailed in all directions. She had been knocked out by a Brute shot grenade, and left for dead. The Brutes were pressing the front line hard, and had overwhelmed her position. Melanie looked around and noticed that the Marines were pulling back, yet she was now behind the enemies established position. She pulled up her med kit, and groggily fondled through it. She couldn't focus. Her head was echoing as if she was floating in an ocean. She found a small injector, pulled down her collar and slapped the injector onto her neck. She squeezed it and a high pressure jet of adrenaline shot into her blood stream. Two beats of her heart and she was quickly regaining focus.

She explosively stood to her feet, wiped the blood from her brow and pulled her helmet back on. It was cracked, but it would still provide moderate protection. Her HUD filled with static but then snapped to life. She reached around, gripped the first weapon she could find and ran back toward the battle.

The Brute Spike Rifle wasn't registering in her HUD so she had to visually account for the ammo. She charged ahead, running back toward the second line as Brutes roared ahead of her. She was coming up behind them, and they were completely unaware. She pulled two frag-grenades from her pocket and lobbed them toward the Brutes; they detonated with a loud and rewarding thud. The Brutes were blown to the side and Melanie fired a spray of needles toward the other Brutes. The chamber emptied and she slapped in a fresh clip she picked one up from a dead Brute. She relocated, taking cover behind a smoldering warthog. She looked back toward the Brutes' gunnery position and watched as two Scarabs exploded in a wave of blue plumes. The Mirratord were easily cutting their way through the Brutes, and the energy drainers were making short work of the Brutes heavy weapons. A few well place energy drainers were even able to slow down the hulking scarab behemoths.

Melanie turned and sprinted from cover, just as her motion tracker displayed a hostile in the vicinity. She rolled as a Brute shouldered into the hog she was using as cover, tossing it to the side. The hog flipped twice before it came to a stop on its side. The Brute roared as he pulled out at plasma rifle. Melanie fired into the Brute with her spike rifle before the Brute could take aim. The first few spikes bounced off the armor, but the next two easily pierced the armor and impaled the Brute in the shoulder. The weapon emptied and Melanie tossed it. She frantically reached for her side arm as the Brute roared in pain. His long arms swung and caught Melanie in the chest. She rolled end over end until she was laying on her back gasping for air. She stared into the sky, struggling to refill her lungs with air as the Brute hovered over her.

Without thinking she pulled up her Magnum and fired into the Brutes head. The familiar ping of metal on metal echoed as the Brute stepped back. Melanie kept firing, wearing down the armor and the Brute tried to take cover. Yet a round slipped into its eye hole, and the Brute crashed into the battlefield lifeless.

Melanie was slowly getting her wind back, and she slipped another clip into the Magnum, but she knew she needed something bigger. She motioned to stand and her lungs began to burn. She paused as a broken rib shifted and shot pain across her side. Even with her augmented

muscles she only had normal human bones. She rolled to her knees and began to crawl back toward the rest of her team.

"08â€¦ can you read me?" Melanie stated over the line.

"_Mel! Where the hell are you? What's your position?"_ Mathew cried out over the line.

"Iâ€¦ I don't know. I'm moving back toward the line. The Brutesâ€¦ they're in front of me. I think I'm on the west-front line."

"_I'm coming!" _

"No! Hold your position. You can't risk it, not for one man."

"_Screw that! Find a gun and hold your position!"_ Mathew heavily roared on the line.

Melanie screamed in pain as she was forced into the ground by a massive armored foot, which rested upon her back. As the Brute huffed and gloated over her he looked to his side as several Jackals squawked about looking for humans to kill.

"Human, you did well against one of our own. But it does not look like you can put up any more of a fight."

Melanie gasped for breath as the Brute's tremendous wait pressed down on her. "Get the â€¦ hell â€¦ off of me!" Melanie had forgotten that her COM was still open.

"_Malenie, hang on!" _Mathew shouted over the COM. He was clearly running toward her, but he had no idea where to look.

"Come Kig-Yar, pluck this human's flesh while its blood is still warm." The Brute chuckled as he lifted his foot and slammed it upon Melanie's back once again. Her scream was unnerving.

"_Melanie!"_ Mathew screamed over the line.

The Jackals pecked at her back, striking blood with each blow. Melanie rolled over to face them and fought back. She gripped the neck of one, and snapped it easily. The second Jackal clawed at her shoulder, cutting deep into her bone. Her dense steel like muscles tightened and locked the bird's claws in place. The pain was unbearable, but Melanie endured. She screamed from the pain, grabbed the birds arm, broke it, and pulled the Jackal closer. She grabbed the frail and boney creature by the neck and squeezed until it snapped. She then pulled the claw from her shoulder and pulled out her side arm, but the Brute kicked her in the back with the same amount of force that could send a warthog tumbling.

Melanie rolled across the ground as her spine shattered.

When she stopped, she gasped over the open COM, "_Ericâ€¦ I never told you â€¦"_ But nothing followed, only silence filled the line.

Mathew cried out over the COM. "_Melanie? Melanieâ€¦ damn it Mel, answer me!"_

Black Ops 19, Eric Raynord, could only listen in a silent shock as he sped toward the top of the hill; the exit to Eden's topside and the current battlefield. The crowd of vehicles ahead signaled that he had made it, but nothing was registering to him. Eric was deathly silent, attempting to understand what he had just heard. He stopped the hog, jumped out of the side and sprinted toward the maintenance door.

Outside there was smoke, screams and weapons fire. He didn't stop running. He charged toward the second line and kept running forward. He didn't care about what was happening around him. Spiker rounds sailed past him and explosions ignited in all directions. He made it to the second line and turned toward the western-front. Marines screamed as he passed them by, Brutes charged towards him, but he dodged, passing them. The Brutes turned to give chase, but constant marine fire was proving too much of a hindrance so they abandoned their efforts to chase the suicidal human. After all, he was running into the heart of the Covenant advance.

Eric looked ahead and the familiar sight of an all Black modified ODS uniform stood ahead of him. It was Mathew, and he was fighting off three Brutes. His assault rifle blared loudly, mowing down the Brutes until the area was clear. Mathew was doing well, but Eric couldn't see Melanie.

Eric pulled up his assault rifle and prepared to assist Mathew but he saw him kneel down toward a crumbled ODS uniform.

"Melanie?" Eric mumbled. "Melanie?"

Mathew stood and walked toward Eric before he came too close. "No. We need to get back to the line!"

"Melanie!" Eric roared. His outcry filled the ears of every enemy in the vicinity. Mathew held him back, keeping him from getting too close to Melanie's disfigured form.

Mathew watched as more Brutes turned toward him and he had to let Eric go. "Fall back to the line, 19!" Mathew took aim on the Brutes and starred at them.

Eric began to run to Melanie, but he stopped. He froze less than ten paces from her body. "Get up! Get up!" He ordered, but no response came.

"Eric, we have to get out of here!" Mathew shouted as he fired into the charging numbers of Brutes.

"Melanie, please, get up." From Eric's position, it was apparent that Melanie's helmet was smashed flat. Blood splatter covered the nearby rocks and grass. A Brute had smashed her head in. Eric froze as images of Kim raced across his mind. The Elites had killed Kim, and now the Brutes had taken Melanie from him. Two sisters, two of his friends, and the closest things he had to a family.

Mathew took action. He reached back and grabbed Eric by the collar, flung him over his shoulder and carried him out of the area. The Brutes loomed toward them, flanking them, and cut off their retreat. Mathew dropped Eric, flinging him to ground and pulled up his rifle.

His heart was also aching, but he knew that nothing could be done. Yet he understood Eric's pain. Melanie was Kim's sister, and he had watched them both die.

Eric slowly stood to his feet, his eyes still fixed on Melanie's final resting spot, as the Brutes circled him and Mathew. They were cut off from the line, behind the Brutes established position, and grieving over the death of the one of their own.

Melanie was gone, and with her death came a cry; a soft whimper filled the wind as one man's world came to a sudden end. Eric gave a shout, pulled up his rifle and dived head first into the mighty jaws of the encircling Brutes.

Mathew, without question, followed him into hell. Their guns blazed as they roared into a downward spiral that would shift the focus of their war. This was no longer about protecting the civilian. It was a battle balancing on the precipice of revenge.

****To be continuedâ€|****

13. Last Will and Testament

****Level 13: Last Will and Testament****

****Time stamp \ October 29, 2552**

> Black Ops 05 \ Chief Petty Officer Melanie Peters

"Damn I hate this. Testing. Testing. Testing. Today is â€| damn, October 29, 2552. I, Melanie Peters, am here to say that there are no changes to my damn Will. Everything is the way it was the day I signed the damn thing. Brass says I have to â€| I need to record any changes to my Will now that we are back on Earth, so here I am saying that there are no changes. Every weekâ€| every damn week we have to do this shit and it irritates the hell out â€|"****

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Camp Eden

> November 8, 2552<p>

A cold blue contrail of blood was flung into the air as explosions sounded in the distance. Eric sat on top of a dead brute, breathing heavily as he pressed his combat knife deeper into the deceased creature's skull. He pulled the knife free and stabbed it again and again, hoping that the pain in his heart would go away. Blood splattered on his armor, staining into his fatigues and dripped from his helmet.

At his side, Mathew kicked a dead brute from off of him. He stood and held his side as he examined the area. All the Brutes that had surrounded them were dead, yet Eric had only killed one Brute. Mathew counted three that he himself had slain, but that did not account for the other five Brutes that lay lifeless around them. They had been surrounded and outnumbered, yet lived through it.

Mathew walked over to Eric and watched as he slowly dug his knife into the Brutes lifeless corpse. He placed a hand on Eric's shoulder but dared not to interfere.

"It was unwise for you to leave your position in such a way." The deep voice of a Sangheili sounded in Mathew's ear. He turned and watched as Gridolee uncloaked and appeared before him. Several more Elites also appeared; the Mirratord. Mathew then realized that they had been saved from the jaws of death. "We were returning to the line when we saw you surrounded. Luckily we arrived just in time."

"Not soon enough." Mathew coldly stated. He turned to Eric and forcefully pulled him off of the dead brute.

"What has happened?" Gridolee questioned.

Eric turned to Gridolee and glared at him through his helmet visor. "We lost 05. She's dead." Eric turned toward the front line and watched as the brutes and jackals began to regroup. Overhead, a new swarm of drones buzzed into the area. The brutes were about to press toward them again. "08, pull the Marines up, we're taking back the front line."

Mathew tapped on his COM. "Marines, get your lazy asses up here. Check the dead brutes on your way up. Weapons transports, reposition to the second line and ammo up." Mathew nodded toward Eric.

Eric opened a COM line to Palab. "Sergeant, you have the second line now."

Palab replied, "_Human female no longer in command?"_ Palab questioned.

Eric calmly replied back. "She's dead."

"_Dead? Human female is dead?"_ _

Eric listened closely to Palab's voice, hearing the obvious concern and wondering what the grunt was thinking, but Eric knew that he needed to get himself focused. "Don't dwell on it. She isn't the first or the last of us to die in this war."

Palab snapped back. "Me understand."

The COM went silent and Eric moved toward the gathering Marines. He scanned the lot and picked up his assault rifle. He had nothing to say to any of them. He turned and faced the Mirratord. Unlike the marines and ODS under his command, Eric knew that the Mirratord wouldn't die so easily. While his desire to strike back against the Brutes was strong, Eric still had to consider the lives of his men.

"Gridolee, we're pushing back toward the front line."

"Understood." Gridolee nodded. He turned to his team. "Split up amongst the human troops. We'll provide assistance as the humans retake their lost grounds." Gridolee then chuckled as he spoke to his kin. "It is time to spill more Jiralhanae blood." The Mirratord warriors all growled deeply in response. The Mirratord were living up to their name, and their bloodlust was building with each battle. They had successfully toppled three scarab tanks, and nearly the entire brute tank division. Thankfully, the Mirratord's attack tactics was something that humanity never saw unleashed against

them.

Eric nodded toward Mathew. "Move them out."

"Roger that." Mathew smiled from beneath his helmet. "Let's get some, maggots!" He shouted to the human forces and the Mirratord. A large roar of approval escaped every mouth as they charged toward the Brutes established position at the front line. "Time to get a little payback." Mathew muttered as he sided with the Mirratord and sprinted outward.

Warthogs blazed ahead as their gunners fired into the front line, leading the charge as the humans and elites sprinted toward the brutes. The brutes fired back, but the Mirratord took the brunt of the hits; their shields brushing off the weapons with ease. A roar of aggression followed as the brutes stood and charged toward the advancing allied forces. Even though they were outnumbered, the Brutes braved ahead.

Eric watched as the Marines and Mirratord neared the brutes and he walked toward Mel's body. "Damn it, Mel. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left you alone."

He knelt over her prone form and removed a data chip from her helmet and slipped it into his pocket. He then examined her back pocket and removed the one thing she never left behind; the flask that Kim gave her.

Eric examined the silver flask and rubbed his hands over the inscription. "Do or Die." He mumbled as he gave the flask a shake. It was half full, most likely with whisky from the gathering in the medical ward several days ago. He slipped the flask into his pocket, and grabbed Mel's bloody hand. "I'll make them pay for this, Mel. All of them." He held her hand tightly, hopping to feel her hand move, but such a thing would never happen. The deafening battle raged on behind him as several more warthogs and scorpions rolled past. They sound pulled Eric out of his daze and he gently laid Melanie's hand back on the ground.

Eric stood and leaned into a full sprint toward the front line. He unclipped his assault rifle, pulled back the hammer and pulled the butt firm to his shoulder. Though he was trotting at a controlled sprint he held his rifle at the ready. He peered down the barrel, lined up his first target and pushed forward until he was at maximum firing distance for the MA5C. His palms tightened around the weapon as Marines stood in front of him. Some ducked behind building debris, and smoldering vehicles, but Eric pushed through.

Ahead were the Mirratord, dancing their ballet of death as the Mirratord single blades swung in poetic arcs and cut down anything in their path. Eric pushed even deeper, his hands clutching the fully loaded weapon as he scanned from side to side. Another assault rifle barked ahead of him, and Eric watched as Gridolee and Mathew mowed through four Brutes. Eric jumped forward, pushed past Gridolee and Mathew, and began firing into the first brute he saw.

The ammo counter on the top of the MA5C counted down in a blaze of speeding digits. From thirty-two, it rolled quickly down to twenty. Eric pulse-fired; tapping the trigger with a rhythm so that he could track his ammo. The empty 51mm Full Metal Jackets kicked out from the

side of the gun as he filled two brutes with a deadly spray. Eric's HUD, and the ammo counter, read three rounds remaining. Eric flipped the magazine release, pulled up a fresh magazine, angled the butt downward and let the empty-mag fall, slapped in the fresh magazine, and pulled back the hammer. Total time for the reload was two seconds.

The gun was back at his shoulder, head was on a swivel and checking for any movement. His radar flashed red as plasma rained down from over head. Eric rolled forward, angled the barrel upward and fired at the drones.

Mathew and Gridolee raced to Eric's side. Gridolee powered off his blades, and pulled down a carbine. The green projectiles streaks cut into the air and the Drones plummeted back to the ground. Several marines raced up to their sides and everyone checked their gear.

"Gridolee, Mirratords' status?" Eric questioned as he scanned the horizon. Brute camps littered the area, and they were gathering together to defend against the humans that were now pressing toward them.

"My team is reporting successes all around, with minimal losses to the humans in their teams." Gridolee stated.

"Palab, move the second line up to our previous position." Eric barked into the COM. "Stand by to assist."

"Me understand." Palab radioed back.

"How we felling, Sergeant?" Mathew knelt at Eric's side, loaded his MA5C and scanned ahead toward the Brute occupied territory.

"We go Black from here." Eric huffed.

"Damn right!" Mathew replied with an eager approval.

"What does it mean to go Black?" Gridolee questioned.

Mathew looked up to Gridolee and the Marines at his side. "From here on out, you will address Sergeant Raynord as Senior Chief Petty Officer, or Chief. We are officially Black Operations as of this moment, and our objective isâ€¦" Mathew turned to Eric.

Eric stood and double checked his reserve ammo. "Clean the area of hostiles. Neutralize primary targets; Brute Chieftains and Captains. Then we form a strike team and press forward to take down one of their ships."

The Marines all sat in shock. Was he serious? Did he fully intend to attack a ship with only a small team of elites and a bunch of new recruits? This wasn't a strategy, it was madness.

"The glory of battle is ahead!" Gridolee snarled with anticipation.

Eric tapped his COM. "Supply group, move up with those transports." A few short seconds later and three transport hogs rolled toward the group as Marines quickly began to divide up the weapons it towed.

Eric gripped a Jackhammer Rocket-Propelled-Grenade and two spare rockets. He locked his assault riffle to his back and shouldered the monstrous weapon.

Gridolee radioed his team. "Mirrator'd warriors, cleanse the Jiralhanae from your sector and then form up with the honorable human. The 'brutes' blood shall continue to spill this day!"

Eric pushed ahead and closed the gap between the brutes' camp and his team. He climbed a smoldering scorpion tank and jumped higher into the air. He freefell toward the ground, took aim with the Jackhammer and fired into the center of their camp.

"Let's dance." Eric mumbled on the Black Ops private line. He partially waited for a reply, a subtle joke from Melanie that would calm the mood and keep the group focused but not distracted.

But no such reply came.

Eric landed in the dusty grass as the RPG streaked into the encampment. The Brutes scattered perfectly, splitting their forces and making themselves easier targets for small arms fire from the approaching marines. SMG, BR55, and Assault Rifles barked loudly at Eric's side as the RPG exploded. Brute's returned fire and took cover behind their portable shields. Eric took aim and fired his second rocket into the central shield in his path.

Mathew rallied the troops. "Rush'em! Go! Go! Go!" The RPG slammed into the shield generator and exploded. Two of the small portable shields powered off with a loud buzz, leaving the jackals and brutes unguarded. A hail of weapons fire followed and cut into the Covenant controlled zone.

Eric knelt and reloaded his last two rockets. He unclipped his Assault Rifle and attached the Jackhammer to his back. He then quickly sprinted back to the front of the charge. His augmented strength pushed him forward and into battle. Marines were cut down at his side, screaming as needle rounds impaled them, but brutes were also being slain; for now it was an even trade. Gridolee roared in the chaos of bloodlust as his single blades cut down any Covenant opposition that came close.

Eric turned a corner and fell into a trench. He rolled to his feet and the ferocious roar of a Brute snarled at him; standing only a few inches from him. Eric quickly slammed the butt of his rifle into the creature's chest. The brute stumbled backwards, his chest armor dented by a mere human, and as he raised his head another melee caught the brute in the chin. The creature's helmet sailed free, upward into the sky as Eric leveled his rifle and fired into the creature's skull. Dark blue blood sprayed in all directions as the creature's head nearly vanished from the close range onslaught of bullets. Eric checked his FOF tag, made sure that none of his Marines were in the trench with him, and lobbed a grenade further down the line. Several brutes roared in pain from the explosion and Eric charged them, his weapon blazing as he fired into their armor covered hides.

All around the brute camps, more and more Marines and elites were charging into the fray. Warthogs raced around the perimeter, unimpeded by any Covenant forces. The Brute's did not know what to

make of it. For the past few days the humans had been on the Retreat, but for some unknown reason the Allied forces were no longer on the defensive.

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**Time stamp \ November 5, 2552
> Black Ops 05 \ Chief Petty Officers Melanie
Peters

Check. Check. Check. Blah. Blah. Blah. This is Melanie, same old, same old. You know what, I think I have a ingrown toe-nail. Shitâ€| uhh, nothing new to report. No changes in the Will. But I do love the smell of Smoked Brute. Probably tastes like shit though. Oh, the date isâ€| hell if I know. Check the time stamp.

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Eric walked about the camp as transports drove into the region. Wounded marines cried out for help as med teams assisted them, but Eric had other things to ponder. He approached a groaning brute, laying on its back and holding a fatal injury on its chest. Eric kicked the creature and it tried to roar in protest, but it was in too much pain. Eric used his foot, pushed the feral monster's helmet off and took aim with his magnum. A round split the brute's forehead and Eric continued to examine the brute bodies. They had successfully driven the brutes out of the Southern end of Camp Eden, taken back a great deal of territory, and sent the brutes a message; humanity was not done fighting.

Gridolee walked closer. "I have received word from my scouts that the Brutes have fallen back to their ship landing zones. They are regrouping to attack with more forces."

"I'll call in for a bombing run before we advance." Eric looked outward, glaring at the distant Covenant ships as they sparkled in the setting sun. "By the time the fighters can load up and exit Eden's underground strip it'll be nightfall. Pick your best warriors Gridolee. Leave the rest here to set up the defenses. We're going in with the stealth group. Contact Palab, I want the Mirratord grunts with us as well. I'll need them for my plan to work. Also we'll need a good captain to helm the ship."

Gridolee curiously tilted his head at the last statement. "Understood. I'll attempt to find a ship master." Gridolee walked toward a group of Elites as Mathew stood beside Eric.

"My trigger finger is itching." Mathew joked. "Tell me were to go, Chief, I'll make it happen." Mathew looked at Eric, and noticed that he was awkwardly quiet.

Mathew sighed as he tilted his rifle to his shoulder. "I know what you're thinking, Chief. I'm just a soldier in a much bigger war. And as much as I hate to bring this up, the only people who matter right now are Rose and Kelly." Eric looked at Mathew oddly. Mathew explained, "Rose is doing something bigger then we can fathom. You and I may be Spartans, but we'll never be like the Master Chief, or Spartan 087. Kelly and Rose have the potential to shift this war, long after we're dead. Men like us, we're cannon fodder. As long as John, Kelly and Rose are still out there, and Halsey for that matter,

humanity has a chance to survive."

"When the hell did you become so enlightened?" Eric softly questioned.

Mathew sniffled, his visor hiding his tears. "Two hours ago; when I watched my best friend go crazy when his little sister died."

"Little sister?" Eric questioned to himself. It was clearly the only way to explain the relationship that Eric and Melanie shared. Though there was so much more to their relationship than a simple brother-sister bond, they had a common connection in Kim.

Eric had nothing to say. Mathew was right, a part of him did lose it when he saw Melanie, but it was more of a realization. He understood at that moment that the worst thing they could do was sit and defend. Attacking was their only way to ensure survival.

Mathew huffed. "So. All this sappy talk is making my trigger finger itch even more. You lead, and I'll follow. Even into hell."

"Rest up." Eric gripped Mathew by the shoulder and gave him a reassuring squeeze. "We'll hit those brutes under the cover of darkness."

Eric walked to a nearby pile of rubble and sat down. Marines were spread out around the area, searching for weapons, and survivors. "Tower, this is Black Ops 19, come back."

"_Loud and clear 19. How's the fighting going?_"

"We're fighting back. I'm not going to sit with my thumb up my ass while the brutes make plans to attack. I need a bomber run on those brute camps at Northern Eden."

"_Under those ships?_"

"Roger."

"_The fly boys won't like it. Those cruisers fire at anything that comes close. But I'll find a way to make it happen. I'll keep you updated. HighCOM out._"

Eric leaned back and pulled Melanie's helmet recorder from his pocket. He slipped the small disk into his helmet and activated it. He began to listen to the recording of her Last Will and Testament updates. He chuckled at the first two but then stumbled upon something new. The brass had informed everyone to make one update per week, but Melanie had made one additional update, and the time stamp was this morningâ€¦|

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**Time stamp \ November 8, 2552
> Black Ops 05 \ Chief Petty Officers Melanie
Peters<strong>
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"**Melanie Peters here, checking in to update my Will. I know I just updated three days ago, but something just came up. I would like to add that Eric Raynord be given my whisky flask, that is if he doesn't die before me. He's a bit stubborn in the death department. I swear

the man should have died ten times by now.**

***Also, I would like to leave a private Message to that jerk as well. This is for Eric Raynord's ears only, relay this sound clip to him and to him only, at this mark.**

***Okay... so... only Eric should be listening right now. About ten minutes ago today, November 8th, I woke up and you were sitting beside me. Do you remember? You snore, loudly. Kim never told me that. Eric, if by chance you do hear this then it must mean that I'm dead. Off to the big whisky pot in the sky. I'm probably surrounded by sexy men and lots of alcohol. Or I'm burning in hellâ€¦ and kicking some serious ass in my attempt to overthrow the dark world. Uhh, focus. Ericâ€¦ I â€¦ if you are listeningâ€¦ I wanted to tell youâ€¦ to tell you how important you are to me. I wanted you to know that. No matter how I died, it wasn't your fault. I know how stubborn you get, trying to take the blame for everything, just like with Kim. You hid it well, but I know it hurt you more than it hurt me when she died, and she's my sister so that means a lot. It wasn't your fault she died. It isn't your fault that I died; unless you shot me, and if you didâ€¦ well, I'll haunt you from here to eternity.**

***This morning, I was watching you sleep, and I put my head on your shoulder. Honestly, I never understood what Kim saw in you. I mean, you were more my type than hersâ€¦ but I guess you were the one who chose Kim. Since the moment I joined the Black Ops, I haven't slept that good. I'm thankful of you being in my life, Eric. I had a really nice dream while we slept. You, Kim and I were back in boot and there was no war. No Covenant. We were together and happy, like a real family.**

Geez, this is getting long. You know what I mean. I'm not Kim, and you know that. I'm not a romantic book of gooey words like she was. I'm a soldier, not a romance nut. Kim did love those stupid romance novels. You've always been special to me, Eric, and I guess I just wanted to say thanks. Thanks for being there. God that was sappyâ€¦"

Eric pulled the chip from his helmet, stood and motioned toward the group. "Tower do you copy?"

"_Loud and clear. I'm still waiting to hear back from the flyboys."_

"Understood. I have another request. I need to find a way to reconnect the lower level uplink. We need AI support."

"_Siren has been sending work teams to establish a link. COM traffic works, but she can't relay herself. I'll check on her status."_

"Roger."

"_Looks like the tech crew is nearly done. She should have a digital uplink any moment now."_

"Tell her to contact me as soon as she can. 19 out." Eric knew that telling Siren about Mel's death was a bad idea, but hopefully she would be able to control herself. However, even if he didn't tell Siren, she would know once she up-linked herself into the team COM.

Knowledge of Melanie's absence would be instantaneous.

"_19, this is tower. HighCOM has dispatched your fly boys. They'll drop a few salvos on the brute camps and then you're on your own." _

"Roger that tower." Now it was only a matter of time before Eric and company would make their move.

Gridolee approached Eric and nodded. "Palab is on his way, along with his team. What is the plan?"

Eric turned to the Marines. "Alright maggots, from here on out, we go silent. Once the sun sets and the grunts arrive, we'll sneak into the brute's camps and take their ship right from under their noses. Once we seize their ship, we'll turn it against the others."

A buzz entered Eric's COM. "I see you've changed your ID tag, Senior Chief Petty Officer." Siren stated with a chuckle, though her communication was filled with static. "I guess the Black Ops are back in action. Though 'Sergeant' had such a better ring to it."

"How long before you can access that Covenant cruiser?" Eric questioned the AI.

"The techs are still working on my uplink. I am barely able to talk with you right now. Another few minutes and I'll be fully online with the top side, however, in order for me to hack into that ship, I'll need a transfer node that is at least four hundred meters from that Covenant ship. And, that Covenant ship will need to be broadcasting so that I can find an open frequency and hack in."

"I'm leading a strike team inside that ship, we can get you inside, but how can we get a data node close enough?"

"A longsword or Pelican will suffice. They can broadcast my digital commands just like the Rogue Fantasy did when we attacked Truth's ship."

"Make it happen." Eric ordered.

"Roger that. I'm relaying your orders to Eden's air strip. How much time?"

"We attack at dark." Eric examined his gear as Siren's signal became more clear.

The static faded and she acknowledged her status. "The uplink line is operational. I'm scanning the FoF tags in the area and establishing your team markers whileâ€¦ comparingâ€¦ itâ€¦ toâ€¦ where's 05?"

Eric sighed heavily as he prepared to discuss the events of the last few hours. He had no idea of how Siren would take the news.

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Simyaldee opened his eyes and glared upward. His wounds were no longer causing him severe pain and he could finally stand to his feet. Cautiously he stood and stretched his weary bones, a brief

dizzy spell past, and he began to dress. His armor had been cleaned, no doubt thanks to Palab's followers, but the dents and scratches were still ever present.

Simyaldee stepped out of the makeshift tent, made from spare cloths, and looked about the camp. Unggoy and Sangheili muttered around, all anticipating the battle that was surely ahead. In the distance the sound of weapons fire grew immeasurable. It was so loud that it seemed as though it were coming closer.

"Second, you are awake." A Mirratord warrior stated in surprise. "Finally, we can join the others in combat."

"What is happening?" Simyaldee questioned.

"The honorable human is attacking the Jiralhanae camps to the north. Lieutenant Gridolee and several of our brothers have gone to assist."

"Is the human female still in command of the door? I will speak with her before we depart."

"Second, the human female fell in combat. Palab is now in command. His unit has moved to the second line."

Simyaldee finished strapping on his armor and motioned toward the second line. "I understand. Explains why Raynord is suddenly attacking." Simyaldee neared the Second defensive line and powered on his COM. "Sergeant Palab, do you copy?"

Palab turned as he heard Simyaldee and gasped to see him walking about. "Me see you! Me here!"

Simyaldee spotted the Grunt King standing behind a human barricade, surround by Marines and several grunts. "Sergeant, what is the status of the battle?"

Palab looked outward at the plumes of smoke and stray fire. "Honorable human lead forces into heart of first line. Mirratord attack from sides. Human soldiers attack second. Jiralhanae defeated, but more troops coming."

At that moment Palab's COM chirped. _"Sergeant Palab, you are needed at the front line. Leave a suitable warrior in command. And bring your Mirratord team with you."_

"Gridolee, what happening?" Palab replied.

"_The honorable human is taking a strike team into the nearest Covenant ship. He has a plan, a glorious one!"_

"Me come." Palab cheered. He looked up to Simyaldee. "Second, we need you if you can fight."

Simyaldee paused to give it thought. Could he risk leaving the gate without a suitable warrior to guard it?

A set of heavy footsteps approached as three Sangheili walked towards Simyaldee. Of the group, two were Mirratord, and their Black Spec Ops armor showed the same battle damage as a Warrior who had seen

numerous combat. They were veterans within the Mirratord. Between them, and few steps ahead, walked the Elite Councilor. The Elder's silver armor glistened in the twilight hour as he approached Simyaldee.

The Elder pulled off his elaborate headdress and cupped it under his arms. "Good to see you on your feet, Second. I overheard Sergeant Palab's question. Go and fight with your brothers. It has been many years since I have led a defensive, but I feel that I can lead these forces without fail. I have a few tricks up my sleeve that these 'Brutes' will not expect." The Elder looked down to Palab and nodded. "There is much an old Sangheili like myself has had to accept in these past few weeks. Hurry. Go and join your brothers and lead the Mirratord to victory."

Simyaldee added. "Do not hesitate to withdraw our forces into the Camp, Elder. When we return, we will end this siege."

"May our ancestors guide your sword."

Simyaldee and Palab bowed their heads and stated, "For the Honor of the Mirratord." They then sprinted to the front line as the Elder turned to his Mirratord guards.

"Now then, inform me of the current battle structure." The next few hours would be crucial to the defense of the human stronghold and the protection of the Tree of Life.

However, no one was aware of what was happening on the far side of the Galaxy.

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High Orbit of Uncharted World // Location Unknown
> October 31, 2552 :: Sol Relative Time<p>

Across time and a space, on the very edge of the Galaxy, a small habitable planetoid was surrounded by the silver lines of dozens of Sangheili controlled ships. The planet was believed to be one of the primary outposts of a race known only as The Prime. In high orbit of this world floated the Prime's main battle fleet. Their ships were weaker than the Sangheili forces, and yet they fought relentlessly.

Eighty years ago, the Prophet known as Regret had kidnapped the Sangheili with the purest of blood, and sent them to a world once believed to be abandoned, yet the Prime still thrived. The Prime had embraced the Sangheili into their culture, given them a home and shared their food. However, the Sangheili could not ignore the crime being committed against their race back home. The Prime taught the Sangheili much of the Forerunner's past and the true purpose of Halo had been revealed to them, and now the Sangheili were attempting to return and destroy the weapons that threatened their distant kin.

But the Prime could not let the Sangheili interfere with "The Path of Reclamation", for it was a purpose far more important than even they could understand. This created a drift between the Prime and the Sangheili race, and for years they have been feuding, attempting to stop the Sangheili from finding Halo.

The uncharted world was now a battlefield, a world of turmoil as the Prime fought to protect the legacy of the Forerunners, but they were no match for the Sangheili's will. The Sangheili's numbers, their might, and their tenacity were unstoppable, and though the Prime fought valiantly, they had now been pushed into a corner. The Prime's forces had been outclassed, outsmarted, and outmaneuvered by the leader of the Sangheili race; a leader whom was adopted by their kin and known primarily as the Queen.

And it was upon this world, that the battle against the ruminants of the Forerunners quickly began to shift. 'The Path of Reclamation' had to be stopped.

****To be continued.****

* * *

>NOTES: I will be leaning away from Earth for one chapter, then returning, and then I will begin the "Filler" Levels for July and August.
 Thanks for reading.
>

**** soulguard****

14. Quarantine

****Level 14: Quarantine****

High Orbit of Uncharted World // Location Unknown
> Sangheili Flagship: The Key of Deliverance
> October 31, 2552 :: Sol Relative Time<p>

The long narrow hallway leading to the command deck of the Sangheili flagship, The Key of Deliverance, was crowded with wounded Elite warriors. Bandaged and exhausted, they all became silent as a female Sangheili stepped into the corridor. They quickly knelt and bowed their heads in respect as she past them by. Each of the warriors felt a sense of comfort when her cloak grazed against them; recharging their warrior spirit. Behind the female figure walked her oldest son, the Commander of the Sangheili ground forces. He, like his warrior kinsmen, was also covered in the marks of combat. His armor was indistinguishable from the rest of his warriors, but everyone knew his face as well as his name; Yalsmadee.

Yalsmadee strode behind his mother, the adopted Queen of the Sangheili. However, she was not the type of female who would sit by and let others lead. She too was a natural born warrior, and over time she took the title of Queen very seriously. Wearing the ceremonial colors of her family, her colorfully decorated gown split over her legs to provide freedom of movement. Her shoulders supported the weight of a full length cloak, and upon her head was an elaborate headdress, however it was different from the male helmets as it had a spike that protruded forward from her forehead. Various jewels and beads hung from her helmet and neck, mandatory accessories demanded by the elder females; she found them unnecessary for a warrior, but she wore them for the honor of her race. Like any warrior, the Queen wore her armor, though slightly modified to fit her female attributes. Her armor was a dark red, matching the ceremonial colors

of the Sangheili, and two spikes extended slightly outward from her forearm guards.

She was the Queen, and even though she was to be protected she chose to fight. She wore armor not just for show, but for practicality. The spikes upon her forearms showed the wear and tare of battle, dents and scratches marked her armor, but the injuries upon her skin had been cleverly hidden from public view; thanks to her female servants and medical aids. As a sign of power, the Queen had to always look invincible, though she was far from it. The Queen had been wounded in numerous battles and shed her own blood, but she had also spilled the blood of many of her enemies.

The door to the Command Deck parted and she stepped onto the command podium. The ship master stood tall as she approached and nodded in respect. "My Queen, reports from the planet's surface are still coming in." He stated deeply as he returned to the view screen.

The Queen looked over the battle field schematic of the raging war upon the planets surface. "Have we received any reports from the Unggoy recon teams?"

"None." The ship master returned. "I fear we may have lost them."

Commander Yalsmadee looked over the terrain data. "I can have a search team of Spirits cover the area. With my Lekgolo guards, we could canvas the area and retrieve the Unggoy."

The Queen looked at the terrain data. "No. They are usually quite skilled at reconnaissance missions. If they were discovered then it would be proof that the relay station is guarded more thoroughly than I had anticipated. We will give them more time to complete their task." The Queen stood tall and glanced over the enemy ship locations on the battle-net. Each of the enemy's ships was shown as red triangles, while the ships in her fleet were marked with green circles. She looked at the relevant location of the enemy ships in correspondence to her lost team of Unggoy.

She folded her arms in thought. "They've formed a battle formation over the energy station, haven't they?"

The ship master nodded in approval. "Yes, my Queen. They formed this formation once we entered the system."

The Queen peered closely at the battle-net. "If the Unggoy found the station, then they are behind that battle formation. Their transmissions could be jammed."

A shout came from the COM station at the rear of the deck. "Ship Master, the Unggoy team is sending the coordinates!" The bridge crew erupted into cheers and the Queen exhaled in relief.

She turned to her eldest son. "Commander, retrieve the Unggoy."

"Immediately, my Queen." Yalsmadee turned and quickly raced off the command deck.

"Ship master, do you have the coordinates?" She questioned.

The ship master scanned the Unngoy transmission. "Yes. Uploading the targeting vectors." The ship master stood and turned to his crew. "Helm, move the ship into firing position. COM, signal the Righteous Flame and Freedoms Wing to take flanking position to guard our attack. Weapons, prepare all cannons for bombardment."

The helmsman replied back. "Sir, three enemy ships are moving into intercept course."

The ship master snarled in protest. "Launch Seraph fighter wings to distract them. COM, signal the destroyer group to advance on those ships, and notify them not to take the full brunt of the enemy's attack. We only need a brief moment to launch our salvo on the target."

The Queen remained silent, her eyes focused on the battle-net and tracking the movements of every ship on screen. "What are you planning?" She mumbled softly to herself; questioning the enemy tactics. She looked up into the northern pole of the planet at a small enemy battle group of less than four ships. They sat motionless on the battle-net, yet even though her flagship was moving into position directly over the planet's main energy relay station, the enemy seemed unconcerned. "We have your relay station targeted, yet you show no interest in moving all of your ships to guard it. Why?" She raised her hand and tapped her lower mandibles. She then pressed the COM relay to her Commander. "Commander Yalsmadee, what is your status?"

"_My retrieval team has just disembarked. We will be arriving at the extraction point soon."_ Yalsmadee replied.

"Send your Seraph wing ahead of you." The Queen added. "Send them on a scanning run of the area for visual confirmation of the Unggoy team."

"_Yes my Queen."_ The COM faded and the Queen squinted in thought.

The Ship Master looked to her in puzzlement. "What is it? What do you sense?"

"If you knew that a superior force was about to destroy your main source of power across the planet, would you not defend it with all you had?" She questioned.

The ship master looked over the battle-net. "Their battle group is dispersed to defend against our fleet. Even if they could break off from our attacks, they would risk losing more if they chose to defend their power source."

The Queen then added. "This is what I thought as well. But if that is the case, then why are they holding ships out of combat?" She pointed to the ships at the northern pole.

The Ship master thought deeper. "A back up, perhaps?"

"They knew we were coming, they have had several days to prepare. Our ground forces have met little resistance and their fleet is uncoordinated. In just a few hours we have completely pushed them

back, yet they are still keeping ships out of combat. They have ships in odd formations as if

The Helmsman quickly reported, cutting across the Queen's statement. "Sir, we are in position. Our destroyer wing is pushing back the enemy ships."

"Weapons, lock on to the targeted coordinates and fire!" The ship master ordered.

The weapons controller charged all plasma batteries and took aim on the target.

The Queen's eyes grew wide as she watched the ships near the northern pole begin to vanish from the battle-net. Soon reports all across the board began to show that ships were exiting the system.

The ship master smirked confidently. "My Queen, the enemy ships are exiting the system! We have won!"

"Cease fire!" She shouted quickly as her heart skipped a beat.

"Salvo away!" The crewman shouted as he nervously turned to the Queen. "Forgive me, I could not stop!"

"Divert the plasma charges!" She ordered. "Disperse them if you have to!" The weapons controller frantically locked on to the twenty different plasma volleys streaking toward the planet's surface.

"My Queen what is it?" The ship master began to question but then he saw it. The enemy's timing for leaving the planet was too precise. This was an organized retreat, starting from the rear lines and then finally the front line ships vanished into slip space.
> His eyes grew wide as the realization hit him. "A trap!"

The Queen wasted no time. "Yalsmadee, turn your teams away from the planet! Get out of there! COM, order the fleet away from the planet! Prepare for emergency system exit protocol!"

The ship master raced toward the weapons control and assisted in discharging the numerous plasma volleys which were streaking toward the planet's surface. "How many left?"

"Ten, sir!" The elite sharply returned in a frantic tone. "What is happening? Is it really a trap?"

"I hope we are wrong about this!" The ship master roared.

The Queen looked down at the weapons controls. "How many left?"

"Four!" The ship master and the weapons controller shouted in unison.

The helmsman roared. "All enemy ships have exited the system. Our fleet is moving away from the planet."

The COM officer added. "Ground forces are reporting that all enemy combatants have ceased fire. What is going on?"

"Gods of our ancestors, protect us." The queen silently prayed.
"Yalsmadee, where are you?"

"Exiting the atmosphere now. What has happened?" He replied over the com.

The ship master roared in frustration. "The last plasma volley is out of range! We can no longer divert it! Helm, system exit protocol one! Get us out of here! We must assure the safety of the Queen at all cost!"

The COM officer roared into his line. "All ships exit protocol one. I repeat, exit Protocol one!" One by one the ships of the Sangheili fleet vanished into slip space as the lone plasma volley fell toward the energy relay station. The boiling mass of plasma arced toward the planet and through the upper layer of the atmosphere.

The Queen lowered her head as her son's words echoed in her ears.
"_What is happening? My ground forces are retreating to their ships, but they want to know what is happening."_

"Pray, my son. Pray that I am wrong."

"_Motherâ€¦_" Static filled the line as the _Key of Deliverance_ moved out of range of the COM signal. The ship flashed a brilliant glow of light as it slowly slid into a bubbling spectrum of sub space, and then vanished.

The plasma torpedoed accurately toward its target and crashed into the heart of the energy relay station. A monstrous explosion tore into the sky of the planet's surface. The energy relay station exploded, as it should have. The power around the world faded and the world became black, however, deep below the planet's surface, a weapon was activated. A pulsating flicker of silver-white chained around the planet's surface.

Yalsmadee watched as the signal from the flash ship faded, and the location of the Fleet vanished from his control station. He placed his hand on the pilots shoulder and leaned closer to the aft screen. After the silver-white flicker began to race around the world, the planet's surface began to crack and glow a dull orange color. Whatever was happening on the planet was not going to be good.

He turned on his COM and radioed to all of his ground forces. "Get into the atmosphere and form up. Seraph patrol groups, defend the retreating spirits." The safety of his men had become his prime directive. But he instantly knew that not all of them would be able to get off of the surface.

The COM flashed. "_Commander, we see the Unngoy recon team. I will attempt to extract them."_

"Be cautious, the planet looks like is going to explode, but there is something odd about it."

Another COM channel flashed. "_Sir, movement! There is movement beneath the planet's crust. Some form of machine is breaking through. Millions of them!"_

"Do not engage! I repeat, do not engage. Exit the planet's atmosphere and form up with the rest of the brigade. Your priority is to get away from the planet!" He turned off the COM and watched as the floating machines began to spill out of the cracks in the planet's crust. They began to collect in massive groups, forming clouds of machines and orbiting the decaying world. More and more of them spilled into the sky, tearing away at the land beneath. "They keep coming out."

The COM blurted, _"Commander, the machines are pursuing our ships. No hostile actions have been noticed. They are merely, watching us."_

Yalsmadee opened a wide banned COM channel to all of his forces. "To all forces, do not engage the machines. We do not know what they are. Do not resist unless provoked by a physical attack. If the machines attempt contact, relay them to my COM." He patted the pilot. "Send a transmission to the fleet, tell them that we successfully escaped the planet, but to send only one ship to extract us, the fleet may still be in danger."

On the far side of the solar system, the Queen held her head down nervously awaiting the report that the planet was gone, destroyed in a foolish plot by the enemy to destroy her fleet; and with that news she knew she would have lost her eldest son. Every second lasted a lifetime, but suddenly the COM sounded. She looked up, as everyone else did, toward the COM station.

"Sir, the Commander is alive, as well as our ground forces!" A collective sigh radiated around the command deck. "He says that the fleet may still be in danger, requesting one ship come to extract them."

The ship master nodded. "Understood. Tell the Ship master of the _Persistence and Vigilance_ to go and collect them."

The Queen stepped in. "I will accompany them."

"My Queen, I can not allow that."

"Our enemy fled from this world knowing that something was going to happen. I feared a weapon would be activated, but it appears it is something different. They either retreated in fear, or for safety, and I wish to know why."

"Can we not simply trust in the Commander to gather the intelligence we need?" The Ship master questioned. "At least wait until we are sure that it is safe."

The Queen simply smiled. "The House of Vas did not earn its establishment by letting others take the risks, ship master." The Queen turned and exited the bridge.

Back at the uncharted world, Yalsmadee's swarm of Spirit drop ships slowly flew further and further away from the remains of the planet, which was now being swarmed by hundreds of millions of machines. Yet Yalsmadee noticed that every Spirit drop ship was being followed by three of the mysterious machines. He watched them in the rear screen and examined one closely. It was a glowing orb with three protruding cylinders at its side. The orb seemed to be an eye, gazing and

rotating to focus on anything it chose, and it had an eerie golden glow. The three cylinders boomed outward from the central sphere, attached scarcely by some form of artificial gravity.

"Are we in danger, Commander?" The pilot questioned.

"So long as we do not do anything rash, we should be fine. They seem fragile enough, but it is their numbers that worries me." Yalsmadee looked to the planet, its husky form now dwarfed by the machines. The planet's mass was barely visible and merely floated in large chunks of what was once the planet's crust. It was as if the entire planet was made up of the machines. "We chased our enemy to this world, believing it to be there home, but now, I wonder if it was only a trap. They left their ground forces to die, and bated us into attacking that energy relay station. Either this was well thought out, or a sign of luck. Is the Path of Reclamation that important to them?"

"Commander, the Persistence and Vigilance is hailing us."

Yalsmadee answered the hail. "We have fifty six surviving drop ships, and thirty two seraphs, you will need to make several trips back to the fleet in order to unload us all."

"_Understood, Commander." _Came the reply._ "However, before we begin, the Queen needs to speak with you."_

"What?" Yalsmadee snapped. "Why is she onboard?"

"_I go where I please, Commander."_ Came the deep, yet soft, female voice. _"Long range visuals do not give me much to go by. What are we dealing with?"_

"Some form of machines, my Queen." Yalsmadee replied, choosing not to argue with her; he knew he was not going to win any debates with his mother. "They do not appear to be hostile, but they are keeping a very watchful eye on each of my Spirits."

"_How far will they drift from the planetâ€¦ or what is left of it?"_

"Unknown. They have been following us for several minutes, with no sign of backing away. I grow weary of their presence, as I am sure some of the other ships are. I do not know how much longer we can maintain this calm persona."

"_Understood, begin moving your first ships toward our docking bays, yet hold the rest of your ships at your current position. If the first extraction attempts go smoothly, we will call for more ships to speed up the extraction. And Commanderâ€¦ I am very grateful to see you alive."_ The transmission ended and Yalsmadee smirked to himself. It was as close as his mother would get to actually showing any affection to him in public.

The pilot jostled as he examined his radar. "Commander, a group of the machines are making an approach toward the Persistence and Vigilance."

The commander watched as they quickly sped across the radar.

"Distance to intercept?"

"Seven thousand and closing. Their rate of speed is astounding."

"_Persistence and Vigilance_, do you copy? Do not show hostility toward the approaching craft. Ignore them. I repeat, ignore them."

"_We understand."_ Came a simple reply. "_Continue to send ships, we will deal with this."_

Onboard the bridge of the _Persistence and Vigilance_ everyone was preparing for the incoming machines. "Security teams and honor guards to the command deck!" The ship master shouted as he glared at the image of the three unknown objects.

The COM controller turned to the ship master with a curious gaze. "Sirâ€¦ I am receiving a communication. The source is the machines. The language is unknown."

"Patch it through." The ship master ordered.

The command deck intercom vibrated to the words, "_Fadrakja me adrmor, cuoare."_ The voice was familiar but the language was not.

"It sounds like the Commander." The Queen stated. The machines were mimicking the Commander's voice, yet the language was clearly not Sangheili. "Open a channel." She spoke softly. "We do not understand."

"_Do you tundrastein now?"_ The voice replied back. It was quickly learning the Sangheili language, yet its connotation was somewhat archaic.

"Yes. We are beginning to understand." The Queen replied as she looked at the Ship Master.

"_Ring offensive system activated. Shield world has begun countdown mode. Remote Quarantine world has been enabled. Repopulation engine on Seed Ship has been enabled. Non-Reclaimer, aboriginal subspecies, detected on shield world."_ There was a short pause. "_Exchange proper counter-response, Queen of Guardian forces."_

Queen of Guardian forces? The Queen looked to the crew and held her finger to her mouth, a universal silence gesture. She had to think. She was stunned that it recognized her title, possibly by intercepting the transmissions with the Commander; also explaining why it sounded like her son's voice. This machine was speaking of things she could not possibly understand. Shield world? Quarantine station? She thought deeply, but nothing came to mind.

Seconds ticked away and the machine spoke once more. "_Exchange proper counter-response, Queen of Guardian forces."_

The Queen spoke the only thing that came to her mind. "State your purpose."

"_Processing counter-response."_ A few seconds seemed to speed by,

but it felt as though time had frozen. Suddenly the machine replied.
_"Upon Queen of Guardian forces request, stating purpose.

—
"_Quarantine station will begin localization procedures. If a Reclaimer is not present to lead localization procedure, suitable species must be located to lead process. In the event of a Ring offensive misfire, suspect possible infection vectors have taken control of misfired station. All ring activations controls have been transferred to the Ark for centralized command. Quarantine procedure has begun. Data from Halo Installation 04 not received, hypothesize neutralization of ring; possible. Halo Installation 05 reports misfire sequence, hypothesize infection vector interruption during power generation phase; possible. Data request from Monitor 2401 not found. Monitor 2401 neutralized; possible. Local vectors scans complete. No infection vectors detected upon visual scans. Guardian species detected. Quarantine station visually secure. Next stage will be to ensure that ring installation 07 is clear for firing sequence._

"_Exchange proper counter-response, Queen of Guardian forces."_

The Queen stepped forward and spoke softly. "My Guardian forces require more time toâ€¦ examine protocols."

"_Colloquial response accepted. Will wait for proper counter-response. Queen of Guardian forces, please state bloodline for heritage identification."_

The Queen wondered if it was alright to give the machine her name as it seemed to be looking to confirm her identity, but she had little choice. "Queen Vasmeola, senior female from the House of Vas."

"_Identity confirmed. Bloodline heritage matches the Clan of Vastegrin. Protection of Guardian forces main ship has begun. Awaiting proper counter-response for continued verification."_ The transmission ended.

"What in the name of our ancestors is going on?" The ship master questioned aloud.

"Something has happened to Halo." The Queen stated. She quickly analyzed everything that she could remember from what the machine spoke. "And there is more than one of them. This machine is a product of the Forerunners, that is obvious, and according to its statement, one ring, or Halo, has been destroyed while another one is failing to submit its data. It wants me to verify my identity by telling it the correct response, if not we may become a target. Its purpose is to ensure that Halo 07 is clear to fire."

"We must not let Halo fire." The ship master added. "That is the purpose of our crusade. We must stop the Path of Reclamation. But if these devices of the Forerunners are here to ensure that the Halos fire, then we must eliminate them."

"Ship master, our systems are still counting the exact numbers of the devices that have left the planet's surface. It is currently in the billions and steadily rising. We do not have enough fire power to make them our enemies." The Queen paced around the command podium.

"For now, they wait, yet I doubt they can be fooled for too long. Somehow they know my name based on my heritage. Yet I have never heard of Vastegrin. But putting that matter aside, it addressed us all as Guardian forces. This is too much for me to understand."

The command deck door parted and Yalsmadee walked through with his personal staff of soldiers. "What has happened, my Queen?"

"In short, we have time. These machines are of Forerunner design, and they are here to protect the Halos, starting with number 7."

"You mean there is more than one Halo?" Commander Yalsmadee questioned in shock. "Preventing one from firing was going to be a challenge, but more than one may tax our resources too thin. The Prime did not tell us this."

The ship master joined the conversation. "The Prime warned us what Halo could be used for. They did not think we would go seeking them." The ship master looked to the Queen. "For all these years we have been searching for them, but now it is painfully clear that the Prophets found Halo first. As you said, one of them misfired."

The Queen stood at the Commander's side and commented. "Yes, and that is good news. If Halo misfired, then someone else is attempting to stop the Halos as well. And stumbling upon this world is proof that we have arrived back into our Galaxy. The machines called this world a 'Quarantine Station'. This is proof that we are close to our home. Commander, notify the fleet to send just enough ships to pick up the rest of our ground forces. Tell the Flagship to remain behind." The commander nodded and moved toward the COM station.

The ship master stood tall at the Queen's side. "We should be rejoicing in the news that we have returned to our home quadrant. But it may still take many months to reach Dorenth, even at best speeds."

"My only concern is who our allies are." The Queen motioned to a terminal. "We must make contact with the Prophet of Regret. We should thank him for sending us to the farthest reaches of the universe, and then kill him."

"My Queen, we do not know the status of the Covenant. It has been far too long for us to think that things are still the way they were when we left. And we must still keep a watchful eye out for the Prime. They could still be close."

"We betrayed the Prime in order to return here, ship master. They have been attempting to stop us every step of the way. This is the first time the Prime have retreated from combat so I do not think they will come back into this quadrant because of the machines. But the Covenant must be made aware of the Prophets' betrayal and what they really are after. The Great Journey is a lie. Yet for now we must deal with the Forerunner weapons."

The ship master folded his arms over his chest, and looked at the image of the machines drifting around the ship. "They are protecting us because of your presence. If we say the wrong thing and they do turn against us, we are not sure how much collective power they can muster. We are at a disadvantage."

The Queen looked out over the crew. "Ship master, lead the recovery operation. Commander, I need to speak with you in private."

Yalsmadee looked up to the command podium and followed the Queen to the rear of the command deck. They exited the deck and entered a small room. The Queen lifted her helmet from her head and placed it on a small table. The lights of the room automatically powered on as the Commander sealed the door.

"What is it, my Queen?" Yalsmadee calmly questioned.

"My son, once we have recovered your ground forces, I want you to lead the fleet to Halo. I will attempt to retrieve the coordinates from the Forerunner devices. However, we can not let these machines reach Halo."

"Understood." Yalsmadee felt something awkward about this moment. His mother was strict, and rarely did she speak with him informally about military actions. "If they travel to Halo, they will prevent us from destroying it. What course of action shall we take to prevent these machines from reaching Halo?"

"It is awaiting something, of which I am not sure. It stated that they are going to protect Halo 07 and make sure it can fire. Perhaps that is why this is called a Quarantine Station; weapons designed to enforce the isolation of the Halos in the event that hostile forces attack them."

"It would seem that we are the hostile forces."

"Yes. But it recognizes us as Guardian Forces, perhaps because of our distance to the Quarantine Station. These machines awoke and latched on to the first species it encountered in order to distinguish our association."

"No, I do not believe so." Yalsmadee countered. "You must understand that it senses the destruction of the very device in which it was created to defend. Even for a construct, it must know that it is in the midst of wartime. No, my Queen, it would not assume we are friendly unless it has proof."

The Queen smirked. "I taught you well." She sat upon a chair and lowered her head in thought. "It called us Guardian forces, proceeded to ask me for 'proper counter-response' and then asked me for my name as verification." She raced her hand over the silk like material of her cloak while she thought internally. She then looked up. "Our classification, according to the Prime, is species 005, one of the oldest amongst the Empire."

"Yes, the Forerunners used us as their main military faction. We have all been taught this from the Prime."

"What if the Forerunners also gave us an indirect classification; something that their lingering devices would understand upon Reclamation?"

"Guardian forces? Protectors of the Seed ship?" Yalsmadee questioned.

"The Seed ship's resting spot is our home world, and the Prophets often frequented the Inner Sanctum for their own self indulging purposes. According to the Prime, our Inner Sanctum is most likely the last Installation of the Seed Ship."

Yalsmadee nodded, agreeing with the Queen's assessment. "By our birth right, the Forerunners called us to protect it; the one instrument capable of repopulating the galaxy. We are the Guardians of the Seed ship. This is our title, I presume. Yet how does this help us now?"

"It tells me that we have authority over these machines. And if I handle the situation correctly, we may be able to deactivate them. But this is why I am asking you to lead the fleet away. If I fail"

"Mother." Yalsmadee sharply objected. "Your death is not acceptable. You have led this fleet, protected us all, without you"

"..the Sangheili race will continue." The Queen replied sharply. She stood up and coldly stared into her sons eyes. The warm female that was speaking to him early was quickly replaced by her strict leadership role. "We must focus on the protection of our future. One life, no matter how important, is not worth the destruction of the Galaxy. We must stop the Path of Reclamation, no matter the cost. Report to the Key of Deliverance and await further instructions."

Yalsmadee knew this side of his mother very well; stern discipline. "Yes, my Queen." He turned to exit the room.

"Yalsmadee forgive me." She softly stated. Yalsmadee froze and listened. "I will always cherish your strength. You remind me so much of your father in that regard."

Yalsmadee turned his head slightly toward her, looking at her from the corner of his eye. "You have always found favor in his memories, more than any other mate you have taken. My younger siblings have always slighted me for this. I wear his memory with honor, mother." Yalsmadee exited the room and the door closed behind him.

The Queen stood and gripped her helmet. "You would be proud of your son, Simyaldee. He is everything the Sangheili race needs to free ourselves from the Prophets bonds. I hope you are well, my love."

She pulled the headdress upon her head and moved toward the door. She soon found herself once again at the command deck, standing at the ship master's side.

The ship master looked to her and said, "The commander has cleared the docking bay and is heading toward the other ship. The last of the ground forces have been collected. What are your orders?"

"Once all of our ships have retreated from the area, open a channel to the devices."

A few moments passed and the COM officer nodded to the Queen signaling that the channel was open. "Can you hear me?"

"_Exchange proper counter-response, Queen of Guardian forces." _ The device's simple response to her question.

"My Guardian forces will see to the defense of Ring 07. Relay coordinates to Ring 07." With all the time she had this was the best response she could muster. She knew it was a one in a million chance.

"_False response."_ The device stated. The image of the view screen shifted as the machines quickly scattered from the ship, save only a few dozen which quickly grouped together. _"Reclassification of targets as non-Guardian forces."_

The Queen cursed under her voice in ancient Sangheili swears. "Full power to shields, ship master!"

"_Heritage bloodline possibly contaminated by infection vectors. Guardian forces no longer detected. Collect samples for further analysis, else neutralize as possible infection vectors. Queen vector retrieval is primary target for collection."_

The ship master fumed with these words. "All warriors, battle stations! Defend the Queen with your lives!"

The cluster of machines began to contort, shifting their parts and melding into one colossal form the size of a seraph interceptor. The collection of central spheres orbited one another as the outer cylinders merged to form three massive wing-like spires that extended outward from the core.

"Weapons, fire on that mass!" The ship master stated. The plasma cannons charged and unleashed a boiling mass of heated plasma into the machines' collective union. The machines all began to spark with golden rings as their personal shields phased and held against the plasma fire. "Personal shields? Our weapons had no affect."

The combined spheres, at the center of the machine mass, all adjusted and began to glow bright orange-red and fired at a central location on the ship. The shields quickly popped, and failed, as the hull began boil beneath the attack. Air vented from the punctured hull as the machines separated back into their original and smaller forms. The horde of nearly forty machines then entered the ship.

"Hull breach on deck nine. Huragok repair teams, seal off the deck. Security squads eliminate the enemy devices!" The ship master hovered over the video feed of the Forerunner's weapons floating into the sealed off deck, and watched as they surgically sliced their way deeper into the ship. "They have begun a searching pattern, and my men are being easily overwhelmed by them. They are quite powerful. Not even our shield units can stop their weapons." The ship master looked to the Queen. She was silent and seemed shockingly calm.

"Ship master, move the ship into the heart of their numbers; take us into the core of the planet." She sternly stated. "Set the reactor to overload, and reverse the Luminous Key. This ship's engines should be enough to stop most of them."

The ship master nodded strongly. "My warriors will guard the main

systems as long as we can. Helm, move us closer to the planet. Prepare for self destruct." Calmly the command crew obeyed the orders.

The Queen unclipped her cloak and tossed it to the side. She powered on her shield unit and unclipped her energy sword. "Honor guards with me." She turned and climbed from the podium. "We will defend this deck. Ship master, you have command."

"My Queen, you can not!" He silenced himself as he gazed into the Queen's cold eyes. This was not the first battle she had faced, and she was not going to die standing on the command deck. In her heart flowed the blood of an ancient clan breed for combat, and this was how she chose to welcome death. Her gaze sank into the ship master's eyes, daring him to finish his statement.

"You have your orders." She coldly replied.

The helmsman raised his voice. "Entering planetary orbit. Zero resistance on gravitational plane. Gravity balance is zero. Planetary atmosphere is null. The planet, it is as if it is not here, sir."

The ship master averted his eyes away from the Queen and looked to his men, "Stay the course, take us into the heart of what is left of the planet. Reverse the Luminous Key and switch to negative output."

"Luminous Key now reading reverse output. Matter stability is charging. Space time influx is destabilizing. Power gains are exceeding containment capacity. Luminous Key implosion is eminent."

The Queen moved to the command deck door as it began to glow white hot. "Weapon's fire is useless against their shields. Use hand to hand combat weapons." She knelt low to the ground, centering her balance. Her honor guards stood at her side, gazing at the door as it quickly began to boil away. Two of the devices floated in through the partially split door, and before two of the honor guards could attack they were drowned in the golden red light of the machines' weapons. Their shields phased out in merely a second and they burst into flames. The two elites did not have time to scream in pain as they were quickly vaporized by the machines weapons. The other honor guards scattered and attacked.

"Cover fire!" An honor guard roared as he fired his plasma rifle into the machines shields. The floating machine turned and gazed at the holder of the weapon, completely distracted from the other elites approaching its side. Two energy swords streaked into its central eye. The machine sparked and sizzled as it quickly crashed to the bulkhead in pieces. The swords passed through the shield, almost unaffected.

The Queen saw this and gritted her teeth. "Their shields are not impenetrable! Get in close and aim for the central sphere!" She lunged forward at the second machine as it began to charge up its power. It finally reached full charge and turned an awkward blue color, but she impaled the central eye with her sword before it could fire. The device fell to the ground in a smoking heap as sparks scattered about its bulk. The Queen regrouped with her honor guards

as the door completely gave and six more of the devices floated in.

One of the machines motioned ahead of the others. "_Queen vector retrieval is primary target for collection. Queen vector is located. Adapting another stratagem to begin collection maneuver of Queen vector. Destroy the rest and the ship."_

Two devices streaked forward at an incredible speed. They quickly turned sideways and floated into the Queen at full speed; ramming into her. She had no time to prepare. The Queen was flung several feet across the deck and roared in pain. Another machine quickly streaked across the room, and its eye changed to blue, the same as the earlier device that the queen had destroyed. A low hum was emitted as the blue ray engulfed her in a stasis field. The queen instantly lost consciousness.

The remaining honor guards were amazed at the speed in which she had been subdued and raced to her aid. But by this time more and more of the machines were pouring into the command deck, vaporizing crewman and warriors alike.

"Sir, hull breaches throughout the ship!" A crewman shouted. As the _Persistence and Vigilance_ entered the remains of the planet crust, more and more of the devices began to attack the ship. The Sangheili aboard were instantly overwhelmed by hundreds of thousands of the machines. Flames roared on nearly every deck as the machines surgically began to cut the ship up. Explosions ignited throughout as plasma conduits and energy lines were severed.

On the command deck, the ship master reached for the Luminous Key as battle roars from his Sangheili brethren were shouted out in the background. "Power output at four hundred percent above critical threshold. Closing ventilation systems."

"_Oh my. I can not let you do that."_ A soft male voice carried out over the ship's intercom. "_Destroying the Quarantine Station is not advisable. I will cease their attack."_

As if a switch had been turned, the hundreds of thousands of machines simply stopped. Each machine floated in place as the last of the Sangheili survivors began to destroy them, but the machines did not react. They had affectively been shut down.

"_I must request that you cease your plan to self destruct."_ The mysterious voice stated softly.

"I will obey the orders of my Queen." The ship master stated.

Another voice entered the line. "_Ship master, this High Elder Vornaldea of the Sangheili High Council. You are no longer in danger, please vent your stored reserves!"_

"High Elder?" The ship master questioned. "Where are you?"

"_Check your scanners, we are entering the system now. Please, vent your reserves! The Luminous Key is the verge of implosion!"_

The ship master's hand hovered over the control, ready to destroy the

ship in the blink of an eye if needed. He looked over the scanner and watched as a massive ship of unknown design winked into the system. The gravity displacement by the ship's mass was so large that it registered as a small moon, but upon further inspection it truly was a ship.

"_We have control of the Sentinel drones, you and your crew are no longer in danger. Please, your Luminous Key has reached threshold limits! It will implode!"_

The ship master vented the reserve energy buildup within the Luminous Key, but he did not reverse it to normal settings; he had to be sure that this was not a hoax.

Vornaldea exhaled over the COM_. "Excellent. Now, we will have our Queen returned to your ship and we will tow you out of there. Thank the ancestors we arrived just in time."_

The first voice returned to the COM. _"It would seem that you did not give the proper counter-response. A pity your species did not retain your memories, then you would understand the implications of your actions. However, I do understand that you wish to live, and that the Quarantine Station is not up to date on the current situation of the Halos. The Quarantine station is off line, for now, however I feel that we should stress the need of these Sentinels. They are far more resourceful than â€| oh my. Queen Vastegrin's descendant? Now I understand why the drones were so determined in capturing her."_

"Vastegrin." The ship master stated as the surviving command crewmen finished taking out their anger upon the motionless drones. "You mean our Queen? She was taken from us, construct. Return her at once!"

"_Construct?"_ The voice questioned. _"I am the Keeper of the Seed Installation, and referring to me as a construct is degrading. Aside from your insult, I will reprogram a select number of the drones to tow your ship to the Seed ship's docking bay. Repairs will begin immediately. As for the Queen â€| I am afraid she was already placed into stasis containment. She is isolated on another programming segment. It will take some time to remove her."_

"Then at least return her!"

"_I can not. She is currently split between dimensions for study and analysis, deep within the drone factory. I can relay her coordinates to you, but I advise against removing her until the studies are complete. Removing her before analysis can be completed will result in her death. You see, she will be split between this plane and the other, awakening her in that state will alter her â€|."_

"Stop it!" The ship master shouted. "Is she in danger?"

"_No, don't be ridiculous. She is quite safe inside the stasis field. It is impenetrable."_

"Those machines can produce such devices?"

"_No, the stasis field used to capture her was merely to subdue her motor functions. The true study location is located inside the drone

factory, where a multidimensional stasis field holds her. You may send your 'warriors' to guard her, though it really is not needed."

"How long before she is released?"

"Time is irrelevant for a species of her genetic makeup. She is quite rare. I will need to reprogram..."

"How long?" The ship master reiterated.

"Study and analysis will occur on multiple dimensional planes. Time on one plane does not equate to time on another. It could take one minute or it could take two hundred years. As I said, there is nothing to fear. She is quiet safe, I assure you. I will reprogram the analysis face to be short, however, I do not have any control on when these studies will be complete."

"Two hundred years?" The ship master questioned.

Vornaldea returned to the COM. "This is unacceptable, Keeper. Ship master, we will get to the bottom of this, but for now we must know, are you the last of your army?"

"No, Elder, we have well over eighty ships in our fleet." The ship master stumbled as the *Persistence* and *Vigilance* began to be towed away from the mass of floating debris which was once a planet. Now it was only a factory of Sentinels, floating aimlessly in space. "The rest of our fleet is at a safe distance."

"Who is in command of the Fleet?"

"Commander Yalsmadee."

"Yalsmadee? Of the house of Yal?"

"Yes, though the Queen is his natural mother."

"Tell me, ship master, whom is the father?" The elder's question was shocking, family names were often private and not something shared publicly unless it was shared by a family member, but Yalsmadee's past was no secret, everyone knew of his mother, but his father's that was another story.

"Elder, such information is..."

"You said, Yal, I happen to know that at one time, Vasmeola had a mate... the Queen had a mate before she was taken from us. Was there a member of the House of Yal amongst you; an elder female who could honorably pass on her name?"

"Elder... there are thousands of us. Such knowledge is beyond me."

There was a pause. "Forgive me, Ship master. The news of a child born from the House of Vas and Yal, would be exceptional news. They are the oldest Houses in our society. Their clan names date back... forgive me, I am rambling. Ship master, contact your commander, I would very much like to meet with him."

- - - - -
Northern Camp Eden
> Central Egypt
 November 8, 2552

The stars overhead slowly began to fade from view as a thick cloud layer rolled overhead. Either by divine intervention or pure luck, the path ahead was now completely washed away from any form of light. A human advantage as the Brutes quickly bathed themselves in light fixtures scattered about the area. Eric and his team knelt behind a wall of crumbling concrete as they all switched to knight vision. He had called for radio silence several minutes ago, using hand signals only. This made traversing the path difficult for the Elites, but the warriors stuck close to the humans, following and mimicking their every action.

Of the initial front line attack platoon, only ten humans were hand picked for this assault. With Senior Chief Raynord at point, and twenty-five members of the Mirratorcl closely following the rear, this was a mission that would depend entirely on stealth.

Eric found it familiar to the attack on Port Said, which was now a distant memory, but the similarity was striking. Yet this time, they didn't have an advanced attack wing providing cover, or a Spartan to help lead the charge. This time they were on their own, and without the added strength of the Black Ops.

Eric peeped around the corner as the Brutes huddled about their light flooded area. Several patrol groups of Grunts and jackals orbited the perimeter like feral watchdogs, eagerly awaiting the call to battle. Overhead sat the looming ships that had made their way into the area several days before. The three ships sat motionless, but only one ship was directly over the northern camp, and beneath it were the Brutes' supply camps. The camps guarded each of the carrier's two gravity lifts, but Eric had his eyes on the troop gravity lift at the bow of the ship. It would put his team closer to the command deck and it was only guarded by fast moving troops; unlike the supply gravity lift at the center of the ship which was unloading weapons and tanks.

Eric held up a fist and circled three times over his head, then quickly pointed two fingers to his eyes. The Marines and ODST understood; circle the area and watch for spotters. Once everyone was in place, Eric turned to Mathew and placed his fist over each other; slapping them together twice and then pointing his fingers toward the brute camp. Mathew returned a thumbs up and ran back into the night; vanishing. Eric sighed as he understood that the next phase was out of his hands. Everything from here on rested in the hands of twelve little grunts and Siren. The Virus form AI, Siren, had taken the news of Melanie's death easier than Eric thought it would. The one time sister of Melanie, simply paused for a brief moment, and then continued her inquiry into their attack plan. Yet Eric couldn't shake the feeling that Siren was not going to forget about what happened to Mel.

Mathew neared the trailing group of Grunts and leaned closer to Palab. "Alpha and Beta teams are in position. You ready?"

"Me team ready." Palab huffed.

"I spotted six perimeter patrols, mostly Grunts and a few Jackals. Stay clear of them until the fireworks are over. I can't stress enough how important it is that you do this quietly. Do you remember the plan?"

"Me remember. If me team get into trouble, we cloak, and retreat. That signal for you to attack." Palab looked over his team of hand picked Mirratorrd grunts. They had all been trained under Migpap, Palab's chosen second in command and first disciple to the Unggoy King. They all had re-learned the ancient ways of their kin, and knew how to use their agility as well as their weapons. They were ready, they had to be. "Migpap, you lead second group. Follow me group into camp."

"We follow, Sergeant!" Migpap cheered. Each of the dozen grunts checked their weapons and gear, making sure that they appeared to look like a standard patrol of grunts returning from an area survey. The brutes would not question this, but the stupid jackals would. Unlike the brutes and elites, the jackals could easily recognize unique grunts, a trait based on their own society and their relative connection in combat status based on years of service to the Covenant. Fooling the jackals would not be an easy feat.

Mathew cautiously trotted back to position as the two separate units of grunt packs moved toward the road, leaving the cover of the building nearby. They fell into a set pack of six and waddled on two legs toward the edge of the brute camps. Once they were in range, but still in the dark, they waited for the signal.

Eric spotted them in his night vision and then chirped his COM.

High above the brute ships, a squadron of Skyhawk interceptors circled out of range from the ships and the lead pilot listened intently to his COM.

A blip cracked across the Black Ops channel and the Pilot pulled down his targeting HUD visor. "Fighter wing Omega One Nine, we have the call. Let's get in there and cause some mayhem. One pass and then retreat to the preset location." The squadron nose dived from mid orbit, and zeroed in on the ships. All following a tight line headed toward Camp Eden. "Stay tight until we see return fire from those ships. Watch the crossfire from those plasma cannons ship side, get under the ship and make a speed run to the aft. Shoot anything that moves!"

The ships streaked downward and wasn't long before the brute ships quickly began to grow before them. Incoming plasma volley's soared upward, yet the nimble ships dodged easily thanks to the relative distance, but it would become much harder to avoid when they were in effective firing distance of the turrets. Sure enough, the ship's plasma canons were becoming increasingly accurate the closer they came.

"Spread out. Phalanx formation!" The leader barked over the COM. "Go for bombing run!"

The skyhawks dived, pitched and rolled as they dodged the incoming flack scattered across the air by the covenant ships. They sped downward, nosing toward the one ship sitting directly over northern Camp Eden.

Two fighters exploded as plasma split their noses, but the squadron pushed on; casualties could not be avoided. The night sky glowed silver and gold as a storms of plasma and high focused lasers filled the air. But only two of the squadron were shot down. The tiny fighters were now within the zero range of the Covenant ships' plasma turrets. The ships could no longer track them because of their relative distance to the ship, but now each of the pilots knew that they had to avoid crashing into the ship's shield grid.

They all banked and rolled underneath the ship, and opened fired on the brute camps below. Explosions ignited over the range as the tiny one man fighters zipped over head and dropped numerous missiles and machine gun fire.

Eric and his team took cover as the explosions rained all over the camp, nearly fifty yards from their location. But as quickly as it began the sound of streaking fighters vanished as the smoke cleared. The squadron had done their job, caused chaos and alerted the brute, jackal and grunt eyes toward the sky. Their quick retreat would not go unnoticed, but it would take the brutes some time to fully accept that they were gone.

Eric looked toward Palab and his teams as they all quickly raced into the camp in the midst of the confusion. The Skyhawks were long gone, leaving the area clear of friendly fire, but the chaos it caused made it easy for Palab's team to rush into the camp without question. This plan was either incredibly brilliant, or blatantly suicidal. Palab and his team had only one option for escape, and that was to cloak. But if they weren't careful they would leave themselves open to friendly fire from Eric's team of snipers, as they would not be able to distinguish between ally grunts and enemy grunts.

Palab was on his own. Simyaldee, Gridolee, Eric and Mathew, could only watch and hope that everything went according to plan.

Let slip the grunts of war.

****To be continued.****

15. Those who linger on the edge of chaos

****Level 15: Those who linger on the edge of chaos****

Northern Camp Eden Brute supply camp
> Central Egypt

 November 8, 2552

"Reposition those plasma mortars!" A brute captain shouted as he frantically struggled to regain order within his camp. The human attack had left his forces dazed and confused, and his unit in complete disarray. "Regroup your teams and keep your eyes sharp for ground forces! If you were not so lazy we would have been ready for them."

"Why did the humans attack, Captain?" A lowly foot soldier questioned.

The Captain looked at the brute with a quizzical gaze. "We are at war, you idiot! What else would they do?"

The soldier countered. "The humans have lost. It is only a matter of time before we crush them. Why are they still struggling to fight?"

"Ask a Hierarch you curious ape." The captain chuckled. "Just be sure to kill those damned humans if they come back. Now get back to your post!" The captain roared across the camp and the brutes scattered back to their positions. With them followed several packs of grunts, all preparing to hunker down in case the humans dared to attack again.

Mixed into this chaos of confused soldiers, grunts and jackals were the Mirrator Grunts. Palab's two teams had successfully entered the camp and were quietly making their way toward the ship's gravity lift.

Palab waddled past a brute and bumped into another grunt. The young creature stumbled back from Palab's larger size and looked at him curiously; sniffing him in an attempt to identify the large Unggoy.

"Who you pack?" The young grunt questioned. Palab remained silent, and glared deeply into the grunt's eyes. His team began to motion around the grunt, surrounding him on all sides. If Palab gave the word they would kill him quickly and quietly, but Palab did not want to spill another of his kin's blood without warrant.

"Hey, me ask you question." The young grunt continued. "Me not see you here before. You elder pack brother? Who you camp?"

Palab stepped closer, realizing that eventually a brute would overhear their conversation. He glared into the grunts eyes, threateningly. The young grunt began to tremble from his stare. It was not the approach or the hostile intent that had the young grunt panicked, not even Palab's unique size bothered him. It was the depth of his stare. The young grunt could feel his eyes, peering beyond his own, looking deeper into his mind than any creature should.

He staggered back, lowered to the ground and shielded his eyes from Palab. His arms covered his head as he trembled in fear. "Me know you." The grunt wept in Covenant tongue. "Me not want you see me like this."

Palab spoke, but only in the traditional barks of the Unggoy language. "You follow the Jiralhanae in fear." Palab softly whispered to the young grunt. "But I do not bow to them or the Sangheili."

"You are a great leader." The young grunt added in the grunt tongue, a language that the Covenant had long ignored and no longer chose to understand. The young grunt slowly returned his eyes to meet Palab's. "Messiahâ€|" The young grunt was cut off when his Brute commanding officer kicked him to the side.

"Silence that infuriating racket, pest. Get back to your duties." The young brute, in foot soldier armor, looked to the small pack of six grunts standing with the young grunt he had just kicked aside. His eyes could not ignore Palab's unusually large size. "You must be the pack elder. Get these Unggoys back to work before I make an example

of you." The brute glared at Palab, but something unusual happened, Palab, a mere grunt, was staring back.

Palab had shed his fear of brutes and elites a long time ago, and his prior battles had given him an unusual amount of confidence. He didn't care that the brute was nearly twice his height, and four times his weight, Palab only cared that he showed the brute who was really the more dominant warrior in the camp.

"Cast your eyes to the side, pest, before I remove them!" The brute roared. His words caught the attention of several other brutes and grunts alike. "You would dare glare back at me?"

At that moment two thoughts crossed Palab's mind; his mission, and showing the other grunts in the camp that they did not have to serve with the brutes. His mission, however, would have to be his priority as there were lives at stake. Swallowing his pride, Palab lowered his head and looked away from the brute. Attacking the brute would only cause unneeded attention; he couldn't jeopardize the mission.

The brute laughed mockingly. "Wise choice." He then kicked Palab, thinking the grunt would merely roll backwards and cower at his presence. However, Palab merely slid backwards, planted his hoof in the soft Eden top soil, and regained his balance. He snarled behind his methane mask as the brute glared at him curiously.

The brute walked away and huffed. "You have courage, Unggoy. But the next time you stand up to me, I will gut you and feed your entrails to the Kig-Yar." The Brute walked off and the Mirratord grunts quickly raced to Palab's side.

"Are you alright, mighty one?" One of his kin questioned in their language.

Palab looked up and nodded a sharp yes. "I am fine. Hurry, we need to get to the ship's gravity lift." The pack quickly began to shuffle deeper into the camp, but they were stopped when the young grunt jumped in their path.

"Wait! Let me join you. I wish to fight by your side." Bruised and holding his arm, the young grunt's eyes swelled with tears as he pleaded with Palab.

Palab thought back to the battle at the Dam, and how many grunts he had killed that day. Their blood stained his hands and his heart, as he could not convince them to understand that the brutes and Prophets were lying to them. They had all turned against him, attacking him without remorse or regret, believing that he was truly a fake Messiah, an untrue King of the Grunts. Palab had thought that all of his kin serving with the brutes had been completely brainwashed by the Covenant, but something had changed in the past few days.

"Why do you wish to come with me? Didn't the Jiralhanae tell you that I was a fake?"

"The Jiralhanae lied to us. They say that the Messiah was not real and that we would all go on the Great Journey with the Covenant if we stay and fight for the Covenant. But many of them fear you. I've watched, and heard many rumors of a great Unggoy warrior that fights with the Sangheili and had spilled the blood of thousands of

Jiralhanae."

Palab did a mental count, and he only recalled killing at most forty brutes in the war so far. The rumors of his deeds had spread like wildfire throughout his kin's gossip circles; rumors that had been wildly exaggerated.

The young grunt crept closer to Palab. "I did not believe at first, but after seeing you here and seeing the wounds of combat upon your armor, I know that the rumors are true. You are the great leader of our dreams here to lead us home. The Jiralhanae talk as though you are the only Unggoy worthy enough of respect. Many of them are hunting for you, to see if the rumor is true, to fight you. I will never let them come near you. I will fight for you!" The young grunt stood in Palab's shadow, reminding him of the hundreds of other grunts that had come to him asking to follow. Like all the young grunts under his leadership, Palab was humbled by his words, but he knew that he needed to look toward the bigger picture. In order to be free, to truly free his kin from the clutches of a war that was not their own, Palab would need to untie their bond from the Covenant and the elites.

"Listen to me young one, gather all of the Unggoy that believe the way you do. Those who wish to be free from the Brutes must leave this camp." Palab turned to Migpap and Mitab. "Go with him and lead them past the human and Sangheili group. Tell the honorable human that these Unggoy will not fight for the Brutesâ€|"

"Leave?" The young grunt questioned. "No, mighty one. I will fight, and so will the others. When the Jiralhanae took over the Covenant we followed them in ignorance, but once I tell the others that you are realâ€| they will fight with you."

Migpap stood tall at Palab's side. "He's right, Sir. We can use this to our advantage. I know you, sir, and I know that you would rather for them to leave the camp and not endanger themselves, but we all know the price of freedom. Like the Sangheili before, I am sure that the Jiralhanae use our kin as if they are worthless. The Sangheili may have a new respect for us, but we are still not free. To be free from tyrannical tyrants, we must use force." Migpap clutched his fist and struck the ground at his feet.

Palab looked to Migpap, his first disciple. "Our freedom can not come by peace. You know this truth as well as I do, Migpap. But we can not be free if we are all dead. I can not ask these young packs, who have barely understood the pain of this war, to take up arms so soon. But you are correct about using this to our advantage."

Mitab kindly spoke up. "Sirs, we must hurry. I'm sure the honorable human is worried about the time."

Palab nodded to his Second. "Right. We have no choice. Spread the word amongst the Unggoy, and speak only in our native tongue. Tell them that if they wish to be freeâ€|" Palab lowered his head, fearing the very words he was about to speak. "â€| to be free, they must fight." The young grunt happily waddled away to spread the word to the other grunts that wished to aid the Messiah. "Migpap, go to the honorable human, be cautious of who is watching you leave the camp, and tell him that my kin will help."

Migpap added. "I understand. But you know that the honorable human will want to fight, to avenge his fallen pack member. The plan calls for us to be inside the ship when the battle begins. With our kin now on our side, he can not fight as aggressively. He will have to change his attack strategy."

"The honorable human will understand. He is angry, but he is smart. We outnumber the Jiralhanae six-to-one. When the fighting starts he will know what to do."

Migpap nodded toward Palab, understanding his orders. He then looked at young Mitab. "Protect the mighty one."

"With my life." Mitab replied as Migpap slowly, but with haste, waddled toward the edge of the camp.

Mitab and Palab looked to the members of the team and began to move toward the gravity lift. Mitab was Palab's most skilled trainee. Unlike Migpap, who was nearly on an equal level of intelligence as Palab, Mitab was more of a combat specialist. He learned to hone the unique skills of the Unggoy much faster than any of Palab's other trainees and quickly climbed the Mirratord ranks. Migpap will always be Palab's most trusted advisor and second in command, but in battle it was often young Mitab that would stand closest to Palab's combat level.

As the team of eleven grunts cautiously maneuvered deeper into the brute camps, Migpap cautiously exited the camp and maneuvered closer to the humans' attack area. Migpap constantly checked to see if he was being followed. He used the ruins of northern Camp Eden's desolate buildings and cityscape as his cover; ducking in and out of the empty buildings to mix his trail in case the jackals were trying to sniff him out. He then powered on his active camouflage and made his way toward Eric.

A few of the Marines at Eric's side were astonished at seeing the tiny grunt emerge from nothing, jumping frantically away. Eric and Mathew held their position, unfazed. It was not the first time they had seen a highly trained Spec Ops grunt, one that was skilled enough to be adopted into the Mirratord.

"Why aren't you with Palab?" Eric questioned as he continued to gaze into the camp. "What's taking so long?"

"Palab tell me, he say go to honorable human and say that Covenant Unggoy fight with us."

"What?" Mathew muttered. "The grunts of the Covenant will fight with us?"

"Clever." Eric smirked. "This might be easier than we thought."

Migpap seemed shocked by Eric's words. "Honorable human not mad?"

"Why would I be?"

"Me think you be angry about fallen pack female."

Eric was silent for a moment and then knelt closer to Migpap. "Don't worry about that. Get back into the camp and start organizing the rest of the grunts. When Palab gives the signal, my units will advance. We won't fire from cover, we'll do a full out charge. My forces will focus on the brutes, jackals and the drones." Eric looked up to Simyaldee. "And so will the Elites. But if the grunts fire on us, we will have to fight back."

Migpap followed Eric's gaze and watched as Simyaldee gave a firm reply. The Mirratord Second was silent, yet his subtle movement gave Migpap a tingle. Simyaldee was powerful, even for an elite of his ranking no one truly knew his limits, and Migpap understood this all too well. Simyaldee was the Second in command of all the Mirratord forces, and his orders went out without question, but Migpap sensed that something was wrong with him. Simyaldee was not himself. Migpap quickly turned and raced back to the camp as the humans and elites re-evaluated their plans.

Deep inside the brute camp, Palab and Mitab's teams quickly moved closer to the gravity lift. They scanned the area to see if they were being watched or if anything out of the ordinary was happening. The advantage to once being in the service to the Covenant was that they knew all of their basic protocols for deployment. With the speed of which the Covenant was deploying their forces, there had not been a chance to standardize new protocols since the ejection of the elites.

The Mirratord Grunts quickly climbed into the gravity lift, and new that anything could be waiting for them at the top. Normally it would be a deck supervisor and several work crews of jackals and grunts, but after the attack by the human ships, these groups would be deployed and only a skeleton crew would remain in the supply room.

The group of grunts landed on the deck of the forward supply gravity lift and scanned the room. Supply crates rested everywhere as several jackals and drones walked about. Palab nodded toward a few of his team to disperse as the drones looked at them from their perched positions. A jackal also noticed their arrival and began to make its way closer to them.

Mitab quickly ran interference. "What you want, stupid Jackal?"

"You are not assigned to this deck." The jackal chirped in the Covenant tongue. "Who are you? I do not know you?"

"Shut up. Me is where me was ordered to be." Mitab grumbled as he smacked his fist to the floor in frustration. All the while Palab waddled closer to a data node. He quickly opened a rarely used channel and walked away from the node. The second phase of their objective was complete. A surge of power rolled over the station, sparking as if it were about to explode, but this quickly faded. The jackal took notice that Palab was walking away from the station and he quickly sprinted toward him.

"You are not assigned to this deck." The jackal repeated, using his limited knowledge of the Covenant's basic language. "I know you. Sound alarm!" The jackal's neck snapped before it could screech to any of the others in the room, but several drones easily noticed that he was killed. Palab pushed the deceased jackal to the side as he

pulled up his plasma pistol.

His COM finally chirped on. _"I need roughly two minutes before I can send the signal, Sergeant."_ Siren said over the channel. _"I've closed all communications traffic in this room so that the jackals and drones can't report what's happening in here."_

"Me understand." Palab replied to the AI's voice.

"_You can speak to me in your traditional language if it is easier for you."_ Siren warmly added.

"You can understand our language?" Palab questioned.

Siren easily replied to him using the grunt tongue. _"While on the Seed ship I was able to access several language databases. So, yes, I can understand you."_

The drones dived toward Palab but were shot down by several plasma bolts at the side. The Mirratord grunts had dispersed into key defensible positions around the room. Jackals and drones were easily dealt with as Palab stood in the center of the room, without approach.

Siren marveled at the display. _"Interesting tactics. Your team is well trained."_ She watched as the grunts then policed the bodies, moving them out of view. They then ran to the doors and setup more defensible positions using the heavily armored ammo crates as a precaution against weapons fire. The more interesting aspect of this was that it appeared that no one was ordering them to do it. The grunts were working without Palab giving orders.

"_Impressive."_ Siren barked in the grunt language. _"Did you plan this out already?"_

Palab simply replied, "No. I am telling them what to do."

"_But you haven't said â€| oh, now I see."_ Siren began to notice Palab's subtle head movements. He had recently found yet another ancestral quality which had been long forgotten by his kin; the pack communication. Palab's unspoken orders were based on his every gesture. A finger nudge, eye movements, a squint, a head nod, or an arc of his head, was easily translated and understood by his kin. The Mirratord Grunts could read his every gesture and understood what needed to be done without speaking a word. Similar in fashion to when a grunt was upset or angry, he would slap his fist on the floor repeatedly, a gesture that every grunt recognized, but Palab's orders were on a much higher scale. Their ancestors could hunt in silence, using their head and body gestures to coordinate silent hunting parties. Again, Palab was using a natural resource to propel his kin toward working together.

Siren used the video feed of the deck to watch Palab closely, studying him and recording his incredible role as the true King of the Grunts. But then she noticed motion in the hallways near the supply room. "Sergeant, hostile forces are approaching doors two and three. It's another deployment team heading down to the surface. I still need a few moments to access the ship's security lock downs."

Without the security locks in place defending the room would be hard, even for the Mirrator Grunts. The plan needed to change. Palab looked to the two divided teams and with precise instruction with his hands and eyes, they all backed away from the doors and powered on their camouflage. Palab walked to the center of the room and knelt to the floor, in plain view of anyone who walked into the room. He folded his arms and legs and closed his eyes. He would be the bait.

"_Sergeant what are you doing?"_ Siren questioned in an alarmed tone. The doors parted and the teams of brutes and jackals strolled onto the deck.

"Tell me when you have the doors locked." Palab ruffled in his native tongue. He was aware that even if the brutes and jackals heard him, they would not understand.

"_Ten more seconds until I take over the security protocols."_ Siren nervously stated into Palab's COM.

A brute looked around, snarled and then approached Palab. "Where is the supply team?"

"_fiveâ€|"_

He gripped Palab's collar and held him in the air.

"_threeâ€|"_

"Do not try myâ€|"

"_oneâ€|"_

"â€| patience." The brute finished roaring.

Palab wrapped his legs around the brute's arm and snarled. "Me, kill you!" It was time to hunt.

Palab's retractable elbow spikes shot outward and his long and powerful claws dug into the brute's steel, vise-like, grip. The brute roared as he threw the grunt across the room. Palab tumbled in the air, and landed on all fours. He then vanished as his active cloak engulfed him.

Siren commented into Palab's COM. "_Security protocols have been taken over. The door is locked."_

Jackals began to shriek in pain as one by one they were being grabbed by hidden hands, vanishing into the remote corners of the room. Brute's gave chase, attempting to see who would dare attack them, but all they found were the quivering and lifeless forms of the dead jackals; torn asunder by sharp claws. A brute examined the corpse of the last jackal closely as the other brutes lifted their weapons in defense.

He quickly turned to the others and shouted, "It is the Unggoy!" He recognized the claw marks on the jackal's body.

"Yes!" The leader shouted as he licked the blood from his hand. "It seems we have been baited into a trap. Clever little Unggoys. Do they

think they can kill us?" He laughed.

Another brute examined the door they had entered and attempted to contact the command deck with his ship wide COM. "The security door is sealed and COM channels are closed. I can not regain access."

"What?"

"Wretched Unggoy could not have done this."

"Show yourselves, traitors!" The brute leader roared as he fired his spiker rifle into random directions. He then dropped the spiker rifle and roared in agony as blood began to drip down his helmet, from his eyes. He gripped the powerful arms of one of the Mirratord Grunts that had jumped onto his back.

"You talk too much!" The grunt shouted gleefully as he dug his fingers deeper into the brute's eyes. Mitab snarled from beneath his methane mask, took one claw out of the brute's helmet and dug his fingers into the mighty brute's jugular. The Brute gargled as he struggled to get the creature off of him, but his strength faded as blood splattered from his wound. He tumbled over and Mitab pulled the brute's bloody helmet from his head. He uncloaked and threw the helmet at the other brutes, daringly.

One of the Brutes shouted, "It is the Unggoy King!"

"No, stupid brute! Me not King."

"Brute?" He snapped back. "You speak the words of the vermin humans, now?"

Palab uncloaked behind the brutes. "Humans are nice to us. They understand we want to be free." The group of brutes turned and looked at the large Unggoy that had silently flanked them. They all marveled at Palab's battle hardened glare. His armor was dented and scratched from numerous conflicts and his elbow spikes extended outward slowly, mimicking his rising anger and aggression. "You looking for Unggoy King? You looking for me."

A brave brute stepped forward, pulled off his helmet and chest armor, and quickly pulled out a long dagger. "I will kill the pathetic leader of the Unggoy and earn the Prophet's favor! Face me warrior! I wish to taste your blood upon my teeth!" He lunged toward Palab, snarling the whole time. Palab rolled forward and then shifted to the side, avoiding the brute's bladed weapon. Palab then jumped and spun in the air using his massive arms as counter weights, and jammed his elbow spike into the brute's massive roaring mouth. His spike exited the back of the brute's skull, and Palab pulled it free as the brute collapsed to the ground.

Palab looked up at the other Brutes as they all raised their weapons, not willing to attempt the last Brutes brave, or stupid, ploy. Spike and plasma rounds sailed around the allusive King as he and his team of Mirratord grunts attacked.

Siren watched through the camera, completely in awe struck. She had yet to witness Palab's fighting style, and she had never seen a pack of grunts fight so ferociously. "I think we need to reevaluate the

way we look at grunts." She marveled.

Siren's digital persona arose in the heart of the ship's system; she had gained complete access. "But for now, I have a crew to kill." She appeared in a massive space, floating about as digital packets of information sped past her. The area seemed to glow with the trademarked purple hue, almost as if a purple sun was rising in the distance, but this was simply the digital representation of her universe. She extended her arms as an unseen wind carried her upward, tossing her long flowing gown and blonde hair. She stopped and glanced downward at the inner network of the ship.

Siren's eyes scanned thousands of packets of information every tenth of a second until she had determined everything she needed to know. She reached out with her hands, touched the communications channel and began to relay the signal to Eric.

"Chief, we're in. Stand by." Siren stated directly.

"_Copy, Siren. Standing by."_ Eric replied over the communications channel.

Siren now had complete control of the ship. It was her domain. She quickly deleted the pathetic AI that roamed about the ship's core, and then began to expand her presence. She upload herself completely into the ship, save for only a backup that she would leave in Camp Eden's care. Star charts opened up to her, and once again she could see the Covenant Battle-net. Truth's forces were everywhere, on every corner of the world, and then she noticed something awkward.

There had been an unknown time event.

Time had been shifted. She could not find the source but it was there. She averted an exterior camera, examined the stars, moons and processed all the information. After compiling the data she simply glared it, dumbstruck.

"How can my system clock be off by six days?" Siren sat in amazement. She couldn't give time to studying the incident and chose to save the information for a later time. She quickly stored the information and transferred it to Doctor Halsey's data pad to study.

Siren reached out, and began to scan the decks of the ship. The ship's onboard computer, the Luminous Key, registered itself as _The Hammer of God_. Siren liked it. She liked it a lot. With her finger she touched the space before her, opening hundreds of video screens that she used to see the numerous brutes, jackals and drones around the ship. They were frantically attempting to open the doors to the rooms that they had been locked into. They had also resorted to using explosives to open the doors.

"You know, this reminds me so much of Port Said." Siren laughed. But she had learned a lot since that encounter. She quickly began to scan the ship for grunts, and isolated them from the brutes as best she could. If brutes and grunts were together she would simply decrease the oxygen mixture in the room. The grunts methane re-breather would filter the air affectively, but the brutes would pass out in mere seconds from the lack of oxygen. She then focused on the rooms with brutes, jackals and drones alone. These creatures would not be so lucky.

"This is for you, Mel." Siren opened the oxygen feed around the ship, save only the grunt occupied rooms. With the oxygen feed open she began to draw in more air from outside. She began to pump in the access stores of air into the rooms. She continued this until the pressure in the rooms began to increase. She turned the rooms into pressurized torture chambers. The Covenant forces began to grow cold, but would be crushed to death long before they realized the temperature was strange. She watched as one group of Brutes slowly began to collapse to their knees, they were getting heavy, not because of gravity but because of the immense weight of air being pushed upon them. But the brutes would never understand it. Siren could have done this quickly, but a part of her wanted to see them suffer slow deaths, yet she could not do it as slow as she would have liked. Some of the weaker brutes quickly collapsed as their bodies gave to the tremendous force being applied to them. Siren had to turn off the sound to the rooms, as the blood curling cries of agony began to fill her ears. Though her act was immoral, she was not a blood thirsty killer. In one instance Siren watched as a young brute, which had not yet pulled on his armor, held his ribs as they were crushed by the air pressure. She could see the bone and muscles shifting beneath his skin. She looked away in revulsion.

Siren opened the COM. "Chief, you may begin operations." She gave Eric the green light to attack the camps below the ship. She had done enough for one day, she thought. No creature should have died the way the Covenant forces had just been tortured, but when she looked back to the view screen she smiled. A few of the smarter Brutes had pulled on their space gear, and had been protected from the change in air pressure. "Killing the rest of you will be quite fun." Siren wickedly glared at the few dozen Brutes that began to try and escape their tombs. She reached out with her left hand and touched an empty space which powered off the security doors. The brute's easily opened their doors and began to freely examine their dead kin.

"Sergeant Palab." Siren stated into the COM. "There were a few brutes that I was unable to eliminate. Chief Raynord was correct that we needed to sneak you inside. I will guide you too them."

"_We understand, Siren."_ Palab replied.

Siren's smile faded as she watched the Mirrator'd grunts power on their camouflage. They then exited the gravity lift room and began to hunt down the surviving brutes. "They are regrouping near the landing deck." She turned off the COM and let her emotions swell for a moment. She wanted to feel the anger of life, the frustration of not being able to help her sister, and more importantly she wanted to feel the revenge of watching the Brutes die. "Kill them, Palab. Kill them for Mel."

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Ark Excavation site // Mombasa observatory
> ONI Facility Bravo A-11092G: The Gatekeeper
 November 9,
2552

"Damn it!" Rose fluttered as she tossed her torque wrench across the room. She kicked a folding chair and watched it collapse and slide across the floor. She placed her hands to her hips and glared at the floor while breathing deeply.

Major Rawlings stood at her side. "Get it right. Or we all die."

Rose looked at her sternly from the corner of her eyes. "Do you think I honestly need you to tell me that? You should go back upstairs with Ackerson, because I don't need you to stand here and tell me what I already know!"

The Major, not used to being ordered about, simply bit her lip and slowly walked away. She walked across the oil stained concrete of the mechanics bay, stepping around numerous vehicle parts and fully assembled ATV's. She then stopped at the elevator door and waited for it to return.

As she waited she looked back across the room at Rose. Rose walked toward the bullet proof, triple layered window and waved into the room. The elevator door parted and the Major walked in.

Rose walked toward the side door of the massive room beyond the layered safety glass and watched as the green armor clad giant stepped out. Yet there was a unique difference in the MJOLNIR Mark VI. The helmet was a similar to the SPI armor helmets used by the Spartan III, a large golden shield covered her face from chin to the top of her head. It provided ample viewing angle and had an increased targeting scope. Her chest armor was augmented with an extra layer of armor, and increased sensor for multiple atmosphere and a combat knife.

Kelly sighed from behind her new helmet. "What happened?"

"The power output created a feedback." Rose examined the setting on her datapad and walked around to Kelly's back. She opened the access panel and examined the settings once again. "Are you hungry, do you need anything?"

"No, I'm fine. The Spartan III are new at this, so I will order them to take a twenty minute break. Though, I doubt they'll take it." Kelly turned her head slightly and looked over her shoulder, downward toward Rose. "You need to rest."

"There's no time."

"I don't want you to pass out or be unable to focus because you lack rest." Kelly sternly added.

Rose stepped away from Kelly's back. "I have Major Rawlings yelling in one ear, and you in the other. Now I remember why I preferred the company of men more than women." Rose placed her tools on a table and rolled her head back, cracking the stiffness in her neck. "The EVA combination with your Mark VI is simply too old for the power settings we need. But I also don't understand the output used by the Reclaimer Armor. It's on a scale so far beyond my knowledge that I can't make heads or tails of it." Rose closed the panel and walked around Kelly. "The level it is reading would kill anyone who wore it. Not even your augmentations would be enough. You would literally be torn apart by the suit."

Rose neared a bench and sat down. Kelly joined her. Rose ran her oil stained hands through her hair, unfazed and too tired to care, while

she thought out the next steps. "The SPI armor's gel layer is insufficient at protecting anyone from the energy charge used by the shield emitters. They aren't grounded properly, but that can be easily fixed. The problem is the settings used by the Reclaimers. It's not possible."

"Why not?" Kelly questioned. "The suit obviously had it, and a human wore it, so logic states that it can be done."

"Kelly, if you were to try the armor at the Reclaimers settings you'd die; plain and simple. I made the power corrections to the Mark VI and set it to its maximum power output based on the information given to me. Anything higher than that would be beyond human ability."

"We have no choice, Rose. You got me down here to in order to make it work, otherwise I could be fighting right now. You can do this. Go sleep on it. I'll try another combination with the CQB variant while you rest. It has a higher charge rate with denser materials."

"You can try, but the EVA variant is the only one that has the potential to channel the charge. The thing is, I never designed the Mark VI to have these variants. This project was approved without my knowledge." Rose stood and staggered toward the garage office.

Kelly stood and began to walk toward the underground driving course used to test the numerous vehicles in the UNSC military, however now it was being used as an armor testing facility. "Perhaps we should contact the people who made the variants."

"I thought about that as well, but the Major informed me that they were all dead. That's the reason why I'm here and not them."

Kelly opened the door to the monstrous cave and explosions and weapons fire sounded from inside. "You can do this, Rose. Get some rest, and call me when you are ready to start again." Rose closed the door and curled up on a leather sofa, instantly falling asleep.

Kelly walked onto the hard cave ground and watched as the Spartan III ran about with live ammo fire drills, shooting targets and unmanned drones that floated bounced around the room. The drones were small football sized targets that were propelled by air jets. They were fast and hard to hit, but made for excellent target practice.

Kelly ignored the raging gunfire and picked up a box of supplies, inside were CQB, Close Quarters Combat, Mark VI Variant parts. She gripped the parts that she needed and carried them to a nearby room. She cautiously removed the EVA, Extra Vehicular Activity, variant parts and looked around the room. Inside were the stored remains of the Reclaimer armor. She examined the ancient Forerunner suit and wondered why it was giving Rose such a hard time to understand. Yet Kelly quickly understood why the process was so involved.

The Reclaimer armor was only a fraction of the weight of her Mark VI suit. It was more like a body suit with only a small amount of attachments. She could see that the Reclaimer armor was very streamlined, lightweight, and still far more powerful than the Mark VI. Beside the Reclaimer suit was one of its gloves, resting on a small table and connected to several monitors. Kelly looked around the

armor and found the other glove; it was the left hand. She removed her glove and quickly pulled it on. The fit was perfect but the suit was suffering from its age; she could barely move the fingers as they were age welded in place. She then felt a strange sensation on the back on her hand, on her palm and her finger tips. The glove was sticking small needles into her skin. The sensation was minor, but she could feel it, and then she began to feel the environment through the glove. It was as if she was not wearing anything at all. She attempted to close her hand but still had limited movement, the suit was simply beyond repair. But then it suddenly began to make sense.

Kelly repacked the CQB armor and picked up the earlier discarded EVA parts. She then ran back outside while still wearing the Reclaimer glove. The Spartan III ceased fire as Kelly ran behind them and toward the exit to the garage. She questioned what had her so excited and they followed.

Kelly burst into the mechanics garage and sprinted to the office. She flung the door open, startling Rose awake. "What's what is it?"

"That Reclaimer armor is not the full suit. It's simply the body armor, like our Hydrostatic Gel Layer. That's not the armor itself, just the body suit."

Rose sat up and rubbed her eyes. "That can't be. It's putting off too much power."

"No, it's not putting off power, it absorbs it. It works similar to the Gel Layer and how it reuses body sweat to keep us cool, but that Reclaimer armor actually taps into it."

"..the power of the host. We know that much." Rose added. "The problem is, how? And how can anyone put off that much power. The suit would kill anyone with enough power to channel it."

"What if they were properly grounded? A perfect balance of power and displaced energy?" Kelly smiled.

"That would be insane."

Kelly held up her left hand and showed it to Rose. "The moment I put the glove on, I felt tiny pins stick into my hand. I can't feel the glove anymore. It is as if I'm not wearing anything."

Rose stood up in shock. "How did you get that on?"

Kelly seemed confused. "I put it on. It barely works and won't move to well, but it fits."

Rose crossed the tiny room and grabbed Kelly's hand. "I had two people try to put it on, and their hands were too big. Your hand is nearly twice the size of mine and you could get it on. The Suite only responds to a Reclaimer, I'm so stupid!" Rose glared at the glove in complete shock, happily smiling as if she had been told a solution to an eternal puzzle. "The suit uses the body as a regulator." Rose pulled away from Kelly and frantically pushed paper and around trying to find pencil.

At the door stood Kate G017, Greg G009 and Dave G021, the Spartan III. Kate stepped in and questioned. "Is everything okay, Sir?"

Kelly looked at Kate and shrugged. "I think I just helped Rose figure something out."

Rose began to write down several notes and then picked up her data pad. She placed the reading sensor to Kelly's armor and calculated the amount of energy being generated by the Mark VI suit. She then placed the monitor near the glove and the reading spiked.

"The glove is putting off more power then the suit." Rose looked up at Kelly and smiled. "Please tell me how it feels?"

"Fine."

Rose gleefully smiled as a joyful tear rolled down her face. "No pain? No discomfort?"

"No. Nothing. Like I said, it feels better then my own suit."

Rose shouted in excitement and ran out of the room, pushing past the Spartans. She reached a box labeled 'Songnim Special Warfare Center' and entered a preset pass code which opened the box. Inside were several Mark VI parts, including two gel layers. Rose quickly unpacked the armor under suit and ran to a nearby table. She quickly began the delicate process of separating the gel layer stitching and welds, yet trying to maintain the pressurized gel inside.

"Kelly, I need you over here." Rose stated. "Tell me exactly what you feel with that glove, from the moment you put it on, to the moment you take it off. And will somebody find Wesley!" She shouted across the room. "Tell him that I need Doctor Halsey!"

To be continuedâ€|

16. Seek the Path

Level 16: Seek the Path

ONI Facility: The Box

> Lower Quarantine segment of Camp Eden
 November 9, 2552

_**To: Doctor Catherine Halsey

> From: Second Generation Smart AI \Virus Form Infiltration Program
 Code Name: Siren

> Time: 0103 hours
 Subject: Time Stamp - - November 15, 2552- -
**_

_**Doctor I have noted the time stamp for your inquiry into this matter. My internal time stamp shows that the date is November 9, 2552 at 0103 local time. Yet star charts and the Covenant ships time shows that the accurate time is November 15, 2552 at 0103 local time. There is a six day gap in Camp Eden's data base time calculations.
**_

_**I thought that you may want to look into this. I am currently to preoccupied to deal with this, possibly, minor flaw in my database.

**_

**End of fileâ€|**

Catherine sat the data pad upon her thigh and deleted the transmission. She pulled her glasses from her face and placed her hands to her eyes; attempting to rub the exhaustion from her face. It was several minutes past one in the morning, and she was operating with only a few hours of sleep. She wanted to sleep more than anything, but that was a luxury she couldn't afford at the moment.

"Ma'am." A soft voice stated. Catherine looked up into the eyes of a young female scientist assigned to her team only a few hours ago. "You looked like you could use this." The young woman gave Catherine a cup of dark coffee. The aroma was heavenly, it was freshly brewed with filtered water and fresh ground coffee beans; the ONI brass spared no expense.

"Thank you." Catherine replied as she took the warm mug. "You read my mind." The young woman smiled.

Catherine took a sip and stood, placing the deleted data pad on a nearby table. "How goes the analysis?"

The young woman looked back into the cave area of the Box. "Siren left us a great deal of data before she went to assist the Black Ops. The Ark Data Node can be copied, but we currently don't have enough memory allocated to store it all. Even small samples of data are taxing more memory than we currently have available."

"Get more."

"That's the problem, ma'am." The young woman folded her arms across her chest. "We currently don't have a storage medium that large. This thing has millions upon millions of tonnage of dataâ€| and we simply can't download it. But what we do have is the more relevant data. The information Siren was able to access and store for us. We have nearly everything about the ancient Reclaimers, the last war against the Flood, and the rebirth of humanity."

"What about the Path of Reclamation?" Catherine sipped her coffee.

"That information, you should probably examine yourself." The young woman looked toward the servers where two other scientists had been working.

"What happened?" Catherine began to walk back into the cave with the young woman following closely behind. There was a group at the station, but now it was empty.

"The files marked the 'Path of Reclamation' seem to be very troubling to anyone who reads it. The two staff members that have attempted to understand it â€| left."

Catherine stopped and looked at the young woman. "Left?"

"Yes ma'am. They both grabbed their things and left; walked out without an explanation."

"Why wasn't I notified?" Catherine demanded. "They could be a risk. Bring them back! Get the MPs to find them, now!"

The young woman stepped back in shock. "Sorry, ma'am. We didn't thinkâ€¦ I'll handle this personally!" She turned and raced to the elevator as the rest of the science team watched in shock.

Catherine looked toward the server terminals and thought for a moment. She then accessed the file storage and reactivated Gibson.

"Good morning Doctor Halsey, how can I be of use?" Gibson replied over the cave intercom. The rest of the team looked curiously as Doctor Halsey sat down at the terminal and began to access the 'Path of Reclamation' files.

"I want you to examine these files for any abnormal readings. Particularly any form of hypnotic command or sub conscious suggestions."

"Scanning. No such indications are present. I also scanned for subliminal messaging. Nothing in the files seems harmful. These are merely data files written by someone from the â€¦ interesting. A Forerunner."

"Yes Gibson, the files are Forerunner but they were transferred to Earth by the Reclaimers. Run an analysis."

"Scanning." Gibson spoke, and was silent for several moments. The rest of the team circled around Catherine and the terminal, eager to learn what the 'Path of Reclamation' was.

"Scanning complete, Doctor Halsey. Would you like to know my findings now?"

Catherine sat back in her chair and took a quick sip of her coffee. "Shoot."

Gibson began to read the main file aloud. "The main text of the Path of Reclamation is as followsâ€¦

_Reclaimers must become the head of the New Empire.

> Reclaimers must rebuild their military might.
 Reclaimers must reclaim the lost tools of the Forerunners.

> The war is not over. The Flood are not dead.
 Reclaimers, rebuild, reequip, retake what was once lost.

> The Empire rests on your shoulders, Reclaimers.
 Only you can save the Universe from the outbreak.

> We shall build you a weaponâ€¦ a weapon of last resort.
 It will be hidden, safe from the eyes of the universe.

> But if you need it, you will find it, the Ark will find it.
 We must reclaim what we once lost. We must correct the mistakes of the past.

> Reclaimers, it is with you that we leave this task.
 When the Empire has returned, and the threat destroyed, we will returnâ€¦ we shall regain our glory.

>

"That is all that is contained in the main file." Gibson finally

added.

One of the scientists spoke up. "That is interesting, but that wouldn't have driven the others out like that." He was speaking of the other two scientists that left immediately after reading the file.

"You are right." Catherine added. "Gibson, read back the files that have been recently accessed."

"The files accessed by Doctors Kim and Smith are visual recordings."

"They aren't documents?"

"No. I will scan them for your safety. Scanning. Quite interesting. I can see why this would have disturbed the young scientists. Doctor, I recommend preparing yourself. Also, if there is anyone in the room whom has not had any interaction with the Flood, it is advised that they do not watch." Gibson was speaking casually, well beyond the ability of an older AI. It was nothing to worry about as some dumb AI usually have spouts of wisdom.

"The Flood?" Catherine turned to the rest of the scientists, realizing that they have not been exposed to the flood. "That would be none of you. All of you back to your duties." Catherine then turned the terminal away from the group so that only she could see it. She adjusted her glasses and took a long sip of her slowly cooling coffee. "Play it."

The screen flashed with an opening statement. "Seek the Path or there will no longer be a future." An image of the flood spore began to appear on the screen followed by many other forms of bacteria. The spore absorbed the mass of thousands of bacteria and microorganisms until it became a cold lump of flesh. It began to brood, pulsing with mass until finally it gestated into a Flood infection form.

Catherine mumbled to herself, "A spore lifecycle, tell me something I don't already know."

The image shifted to the form of an elite undergoing an experiment, the elite was injected with a small portion of spores, numbers raced across the screen as the elite was given several physical tests of speed, agility and strength. The test showed that the elite had acquired almost super human strength.

"Wait or what?" Catherine questioned aloud.

The display then showed another injection into the elite, and he quickly began to mutate, his body convulsing into a familiar form. The elite had changed into a Flood combat form. Several elites burst into the room and killed it with weapons Catherine had never seen before.

"Oh no or!" Catherine sat back in shock. Something was beginning to register in the back of her mind.

The screen then displayed a legion of elites, all being injected with the first Flood sample; the first army of the Forerunners. The image

then shifted to other creatures receiving the injections, creatures that she knew of and creatures she had never seen. They all became stronger and more agile. Then she was shown the image of humanity. Several of the humans were being injected with the vile of Flood spores; the Super Soldier Gene.

The image then showed the difference of the two spores, one that looked nearly identical to the other, but one of them began to attack the nearby bacteria and microorganisms, consuming them, while the other began a homogenous relationship with the other cells.

Catherine sat back in shock. "They did itâ€¦ they injected us all... we are the carriers of the Flood gene. The spores aren't the carriers of the trait â€¦ we are. The Soldier Gene, it's a mutation of the floodâ€¦ Dear God, what did they do to us?" Catherine stood, her hands shaking nervously. "They found a way to link the Flood spore into our DNA. Whyâ€¦ for what purpose?"

"Doctor, there is still ten minutes of archived video." Gibson added.

"Turn it off!" Catherine demanded, her eyes frightfully opening as her heart sped up uncontrollably. The video powered off and Catherine looked around the room in a lost daze. "I need a minuteâ€¦ I need to think. I don'tâ€¦ know why they would do that to everyone."

"Doctor Halsey?" A scientist questioned as he watched her stagger about. "Oh no, not again! Contain her!" Two of the male scientists quickly grabbed her as she struggled to get free.

Catherine shouted in protest. "No! You don't understand!"

"This is worse then Kim was!" Another doctor shouted. "Doctor please, what happened?"

"The spores don't create the flood! It activates it! The Flood, we are the Flood!"

No one understood the exact reason, but they instantly recognized the meaning. Since the first findings of the Flood it had been assumed that the Flood spread their spores in order to infect the host. This theory was correct, but the theory was slightly off.

Catherine calmed herself and spoke to the group. "The Flood that we know of, the creatures that spring out of our bodies, are already inside of us. It is a strand that makes up an essential code within our DNA. I was stupidâ€¦ I was so wrong. I can't cure this. I can't kill what is already in us." Catherine sat in a chair and folded upon the table, coursing her hands through her hair. She didn't cry, she didn't fret, she simply became silent. She understood more about the Flood then the rest of the team, and she had been given the one final peace of the puzzle that she had been seeking; the source of the Flood.

She knew that it was now officially hopeless to win.

This explained why her cure was only temporary. Palab, the grunt king, was infected several days ago, but the infection became dormant when it interacted with her cure, however, it merely made the Flood

spores dormant just like the images in the Forerunner video. She had only repeated the exact formula that the Forerunners had already achieved. The process would eventually lead to a Gravemind strand of the Flood, if activated. But suddenly Catherine realized that Palab did not fully mutate. The Flood spores began to spread, but they quickly became dormant. The same thing happened to Kelly and Sergeant Johnson. Was her cure only an additive, a similar product just like Borren's Syndrome?

Gibson stated into the room. "Doctor, once you compose yourself, I feel that you should finish watching the images. There is something that may lead to a better understanding of the Path of Reclamation."

One of the male scientists patted Catherine on the shoulder, softly calming her. Catherine wished she didn't know anything about the Flood, the way that the other scientist did, but she understood it too thoroughly. The Forerunners destroyed all sentient life because that was the only way to effectively kill the Flood. To starve them by not letting them grow from the inside out. This process would let the spores live, but without a host, a body, the Flood would effectively starve. The Forerunners knew that they couldn't live on and that their army couldn't live on. The Halo's were a perfect weapon against a creature that existed inside every sentient lifeform with enough biomass to support their monstrous creation.

Catherine raised her head. "Gibson, upload the rest of the images to my data pad and lock it with my private sector number." Catherine stood, and composed herself. Though the future was bleak, she still had her life to live. The Flood within her, and all of them, had not been awakened; yet. Something so destructive was a part of their genetic makeup, dormant and ignored, and if an active Flood spore interacted with it the body would instantly mutate. Until that day came, she would continue to understand what the Forerunners wanted. She wanted to know why the Forerunners risked creating the Soldier Gene. "We have to destroy the source of the spores. We must seek the Path."

Catherine turned to the group and smacked her cheeks softly; a small attempt at trying to forget their fate. "The Path of Reclamation says that the Forerunners created a weapon, built it for us and the Ark will show us where it is. But why would they build a weapon to help us fight the Flood, why not use it themselves. Hypothesize?"

The group pondered the question and one of them spoke up. "Perhaps it works similar to the Halo's, but on a smaller scale."

"A good theory." Catherine smirked. "If Earth and its surrounding populace are dead, then the Ark is protected and the circle of life will repeat itself. The Seed ship will restock the galaxy and the Ark will recreate humanity. Basically, we start over and another generation will be left to solve the puzzle of destroying the Flood."

"But why build another weapon on Earth, if Earth is within the reaches of the nearest Halo?" Another scientist questioned. "It seems like such a wasted resource."

"You're right as well." Catherine agreed. "But what if there was something else that they were afraid of?"

An older Asian woman spoke up. "What if we aren't taking this literally enough? We are talking about a race that was technologically superior to anything we can fathom at this stage of our development. What if this weapon isn't like the Halo? I mean, what if it is simply a bomb?"

A middle aged black man from the back of the room added. "I think she has a point, but not a bomb, something much more powerful. We all heard what Gibson said, it is 'a weapon of last resort.' Last time, we got a second chance. This time, we don't. Perhaps if this generation can't figure out the puzzle to stopping the Flood, then there is no choice but to destroy â€| everything."

Everyone sat in shock at the news. Catherine voiced her thoughts aloud. "A galactic super bomb. Kill off everything, and protect the universe from the Flood, if they survive."

The intercom echoed as Gibson spoke. "Doctor Halsey, there is an incoming transmission from Section III."

"I'm in no mood to yell at Ackerson right now." Catherine sighed.

"No Doctor, it is Private Wesley Williams of Section III Security."

"Wesley?" Catherine questioned to herself. It had been a few days since she last saw the young Private. She looked at the rest of her team. "Keep thinking about this, I'll be right back."

Catherine walked away from her team of scientists as they continued to debate the idea of the weapon and the Flood. She neared her desk and looked at her data pad, the files that Gibson uploaded to it were most likely awaiting her access. She pocketed the pad and attempted to put the thought out of her mind.

"Patch it through, Gibson." Catherine sighed. "This is Doctor Halsey."

"_Doctor, it has been some time. Is Eden still holding up?"_ Wesley questioned.

"What do you care? I seem to recall you leaving with the majority of the brass in order to â€| how shall I put this? â€| see to the defense of humanity. If that were true, I think you would be more up to date then I am about the situation here at Eden."

"_I had no choice in the matter ma'am. And I can understand your angerâ€|"_"_

"Wait!" Catherine suddenly remarked. "How are you able to transmit? I thought Truth was jamming communications?"

"_He is. Luckily, we never terminated all of the hard lines that run around the world. Good old twenty second century technology still has its functions. Eden was connected to the world data line in 2431, so we can still communicate, until Truth cuts the hard line."_"_

"Interesting. So what do you want, Private?"

"_Doctor Santos needs your help."_

"Rose? What has she gotten herself into? She kidnapped my Spartan."

"_I'll call that 'irony'."_ Wesley laughed.

"I don't have time for you to make jokes, Private. I'm aware of my previous actions." Catherine referred to her kidnapping of Kelly after they were rescued from Reach.

"_Yes ma'am."_ Wesley coughed. "_She's onto a theory about the Reclaimer Armor and Kelly's uniqueness as one of the Pure Blooded Reclaimers. She needs your assistance in understanding the Spartan's biology in conjecture to the Armor."_

"She's good." Catherine smirked. "Damn good. She figured out the Armor. I don't know if I can get there, Wesley. There is a battalion of Brutes hovering over the Camp. Sergeant Raynord is dealing with the situation as we speak."

"_Sergeant? I thought the Black Ops were reactivated?"_ Wesley questioned. "_No matter, I'll let Doctor Santos know the details. Contact me once you have more information."_

"Wesley, where on Earth are you? Where did the brass end up?"

"_Most of the brass are still holding up in HIGHCom, but most of Section III is here, the one place Truth would never expect us to be; right under his nose."_

"You're kidding."

"_No ma'am, it's the Mombasa observatory. Once the Black Ops have cleaned things up around Eden, I'll relay the coordinates to you."_

"Let's hope they can, Private." The channel faded and Catherine examined her thoughts. "One thing is confusing me, however, and that is that the Flood use sentient beings as their Food. Once the Flood form mutates inside the body, the body begins a continuous rate of decomposition. The Flood destroy themselves. Yet at the same time, they continue to spread. I understand why killing off all potential hosts was necessary, but there has to be more." Catherine stood and rubbed the data pad in her pocket, hoping that the answer would be there, but for now she could not fathom reviewing it, even the thought that the Flood existed within her made her skin itch.

And there was also the strange time difference that Siren reported. She ignored it for now and returned to the group. "Are there any other ideas?"

- - - - -

Northern Camp Eden

> Brute occupied territory
 November 9, 2552

"_Chief, you may begin operations."_ Siren's voice echoed in the COM.

Eric knew that now it was his turn. Palab and Siren had successfully take control of the ship and kept the rest of its troops from descending to the ground.

He opened his team channel. "You know the drill, low and fast. Go! Go! Go!"

Several humans and elite Mirratord dashed out from cover, lined up their shots, and began to fire into the camps, while Eric, Mathew and Gridolee sprinted forward. The Brutes began to hunker down as weapons fired split the air around them. Jackal snipers quickly took position at the side of several grunts and strained to look beyond the camp at the incoming fire.

The confusion of fire then began to stop as dozens of human and elite troops began to spring into the camp. The brutes stood and roared their battle cry, ordering the grunts to attack.

But the grunts didn't charge.

Jackals began to shriek as they were double and triple teamed by their grunt support. The brutes watched in confusion as grunts turned their guns on them. The brutes, jackals and drones had been betrayed.

Eric pulled his assault rifle taught to his shoulder and fired as he sprinted forward. Two brutes were mowed down as he took cover and began to reload. Mathew and Gridolee were close by but there was no sign of Simyaldee. Eric lowered his shoulder and turned a corner, took aim and fired on the first brute that came into sight.

At the rear of the charge, Simyaldee appeared from the darkness. Plasma, needler and human weapons crisscrossed the battlefield, but Simyaldee had another objective. His prior battles against the brutes had shown him how they had changed. They no longer followed the leadership of one central Chieftain. Tartarus was dead, and now they were split. The various tribes of the brute race had formed into command structures. Each tribe had their own Chieftain who answered directly to the hierarchs.

These were not the same brutes that he fought on Delta Halo, these were not the brutes that ravaged the Sangheili home of Dorenth; this was the second wave. Truth had planned this from the start; thin out the elites and then bring in the brute reinforcements. They were highly armored, more organized, and more skilled then the mere vagabonds that Tartarus had under his immediate command.

Simyaldee peered into the camp. He needed to find the one Brute who could possibly be leading this charge. He slowly walked forward, letting his shields take the poundage of the stray weapons fire; he was unfazed and focused.

Then, in the corner of his eye, on the furthest end of the camp, he witnessed a blue flash. Six grunts went tumbling into the air as a gravity hammer swung beneath them. The sound echoed across the camp and the groups began to turn their attention to the massive brute in gold.

A fully decorated chieftain had arrived.

Unlike the lowly brutes whom had taken command of stray battalions and dubbed themselves 'Chieftains', this brute was older, stronger, and had served for many generations under Tartarus' rule. Simyaldee did not imagine it would be one with such recognition.

"Grimleon." Simyaldee whispered.

Eric barked orders. "Gridolee, we're are going after the Chieftain!" Eric stood and charged toward the far end of the camp. The Mirrator provided cover, running at his side and cutting down any of the Brutes that approached. Gridolee quickly dashed ahead, growling with anticipation as his twin blades glowed in his wake.

Simyaldee slowly followed their path. Studying Grimleon's every move.

Grimleon pounded his chest in anticipation of the approaching elites and the pathetic human. "The famed Mirrator. At last I will see what your true merit is." Simyaldee clicked his mandibles at his words. The Mirrator's legend had gone further than he had thought.

Gridolee roared as he leapt forward. "I'll add your head to my collection, Brute!" Grimleon swung his hammer, and Gridolee dodged it, countering with his blade, but the mighty chieftain lowered his hilt and blocked the weapon to Gridolee's shock. He then jabbed the hilt into Gridolee's chest, tossing him backwards. Grimleon was strong and Gridolee felt it throughout his body. His shields pulsed, dropping to twenty percent.

Gridolee regained his balance and footing. He lowered his posture and snarled. Beating this Chieftain was not going to be as easy as the other he killed on the Prophet's ship.

The constant fire of Eric's assault rifle rattled at the brute chieftain's rear. The brute's dense armor guarded most and he dodged the rest. Grimleon spun his gravity hammer backwards, smashing the ground behind him, sending dust into the air. Eric paused in the dust storm and watched as the blip on his radar darted toward him. He had never seen a brute move this fast. The hammer stabbed through the dust, scattering it as the gravity hammer pulsed. Eric dodged, his gun blown from his hands as the gravity hammer's wave scattered toward him. He crossed his arms and was propelled clear. He rolled to his feet, pulled up his side arm and fired. But the Brute merely chuckled at the firepower from the small pistol.

Even with his augmented strength, Eric was no match for this particular brute Chieftain. He was agile, strong, and skilled unlike any prior brute he had encountered.

"Do not mock me with that tiny weapon, human. Be thankful you are still alive." He laughed. Gridolee, noticing that Grimleon had exposed his back, took advantage of the opening and charged at the brute.

Simyaldee shouted into his COM. "Wait!" But it was too late.

Gridolee lunged, the brute spun and dipped his hammer's hilt into Gridolee's path, forcing him to change routes. The moment Gridolee

maneuvered, the Chieftain stabbed his hilt outward tripping Gridolee. He then followed through with a massive low swing with the hammer's end. Gridolee managed to cross his blades in a defensive stance, only to have them smashed by the hammer's force.

The twin blades of the Mirrator'd were not designed to withstand a blow of such force. The power cells overloaded, and each of the hilts powered off as smoke escaped the sides. Gridolee was forced into the ground by the remaining force of the hammer. His shields popped with a static wash and dirt filled his mandibles.

Gridolee twisted his hips, and tried to roll clear but the brute slammed his foot upon his chest just as he rolled over. Eric dived onto the brute's back, put his gun between its armor and fired two rounds. The Chieftain barely flinched. He gripped Eric's arm and slung him to the side. Eric felt like his arm had been ripped off, but thankfully, it was still attached. He hit the ground and rolled to his knees. He quickly pulled out his combat knife, a futile gesture against this monster, but it was all he had left.

"Is this the best that the legendary Mirrator'd has to offer?" The Chieftain laughed at the futile efforts of Gridolee attempting to get free.

Simyaldee walked up behind Eric and placed a hand on his shoulder. "He is but one of my youngest warriors." The comment cut into the Chieftain's gloat.

The Brute glared at Simyaldee. "Are you the leader?"

"No, I am the Second." Simyaldee walked forward and powered on his twin blades. "Release him."

The Chieftain huffed. "Hardly." He raised his hammer and quickly brought it down upon Gridolee. Simyaldee quickly dashed forward, rolled his blade beneath the Chieftain's hammer and angled it so that the brute's power and force would slide harmfully to the side. The hammer smashed into the soil. Simyaldee rolled his back toward the brute and elbowed him in the abdomen. Grimleon shifted his weight, causing Simyaldee to stagger as his elbow slid off of his armor. The Chieftain then gripped his arm and spun Simyaldee about, and kicked outward. His kick missed completely as Simyaldee twisted his arm free and cut downward, across the brute's leg. Grimleon yelled a curse and backed off. He gripped his hammer in both hands and held it high over his right shoulder. Grimleon snarled at the cut in his armor and then glared at Simyaldee.

Simyaldee stood over Gridolee. "Get back and assist the others."

Gridolee humbly stood as another Mirrator'd gave him a standard energy sword. He watched as Simyaldee tensed up for a moment, almost grunting in pain. Gridolee examined Simyaldee closely, his breathing was erratic—he was in pain. Something was wrong.

Simyaldee placed one hoof forward, crossed his chest with one arm and sword, while the other was behind him. He was standing in a sprinters pose, ready and waiting for the moment to charge. Try as he might, he could not shake the pain coursing through his side. He had overexerted himself when he first blocked the Chieftain's hammer, and

reopened his early wound, and pulling a muscle in his side. He knew he wasn't fully healed, but he didn't think that he was this frail. After five days of rest, he felt that he was still slowly recovering, but at the same time he felt that he could easily fight off anything the brutes could throw his way, however he didn't plan on encountering a warrior of this skill.

The chieftain roared. "That stance, I have seen it before. Do I know you?"

"No." Simyaldee stated as he glared forward. "But it is my duty to know the name of every clan's tribal chief, Grimleon."

"It would seem you have me at a disadvantage. We do not know much of you cowardly Mirrator. Tell me your name."

"Rin Sim'yald, eldest of the House of Yal and second in command of all Mirrator Warriors."

"The House of Yal?" Grimleon chuckled. "The first of the Honor Guards. That explains your skill. To bad your traitorous father could not maintain his duties. A pity what happened to him."

Simyaldee smiled. "You know nothing of my Father!"

Grimleon huffed. "Believe what you will. But I know that your House was in command of training the Honor Guards, but mysteriously your father went missing, or perhaps he was simply a coward, born of cowardice and an unskilled house."

Simyaldee smile quickly faded as his Mandibles became taught with anger. "You have been well versed in the lies of the Covenant. But my knowledge of you is from my own investigation. It is a shame that you allowed Tartarus to be the leader of the unified clans. A smarter 'brute' would have realized how the system was flawed and you were all being used."

Grimleon slowly stalked to his left, edging closer to Simyaldee. "Listen to yourself. You think I care if the Prophets are right or wrong? I'm a warrior, not a leader. I could have taken the Chieftain's house had I chose, but the path that Truth and Tartarus was leading us towards made it easier for me to find skillful prey. That is all I care for." More brutes trotted into the area as the last of the Mirrator formed up behind Eric and Gridolee. The camp had been completely taken over and the remaining brutes stood at Grimleon's wake. "Tartarus and his house chose to follow the Great Journey, but I came to find combat. Your father understood this."

"You will tell me what you know! I will rip the information from your dying tongue!" Simyaldee spat.

"Do not take me for a fool, Sim'yald. I do not order my soldiers to die needlessly. And I have noticed your breathing, and the muscle spasm on your side. You started this fight at only half your agility." Grimleon smiled from behind his helmet. "My forces are outnumbered and I am eager to continue this discussion, but perhaps at another time."

A sniper round split the air and Grimleon easily blocked it with a

wave from his gravity hammer. Much like Tartarus's shield unit, he too wore an over shield generator. Simyaldee glared questioningly. Grimleon did not use the shield against him, if he had Simyaldee easily would have been beaten.

Grimleon smirked. "Dishonorable humans! We shall continue this Sim'yald. For now, this area is yours. But we are far from done." An armored vehicle with a claw shaped wheel on the front began to roll toward the group. It was followed by several more and thusly began to cut into gap between the brutes and Mirratord. The Chieftain boarded one of the brute choppers and sped away while the others attacked Simyaldee's forces until the Chieftain was clear.

Simyaldee and his team took cover as the brute choppers plowed their claw like wheels into anything in their paths. Human weapons fired sporadically at the monstrous single passenger vehicles until they quickly sped away; a clever retreat.

Eric, holding his dislocated shoulder, walked over to his teams. "Fan out and clear the camp. 08, radio the rest of the defense and let them know that northern Eden is clear. Gridolee, get Simyaldee back to the med tent." His voice was stern, filled with anger.

"I am fineâ€|" Simyaldee began.

Eric quickly cut him off. "I don't think so. You obviously have an internal injury that needs medical treatment. That type of injury will not heal properly on its own."

"I have had worse." Simyaldee grunted as he held the pulled muscles.

"I'm sure. But if you plan on fighting that Chieftain, Grimleon, then you need to be up to speed." Eric was quick with his words. He was speaking as if he was irritated, annoyed and angry. Every word he spoke seemed to be snarled through gritted teeth. He opened his COM. "Siren, status."

"_Palab is effectively dividing up his forces to hunt down the last remnants of brutes. Also, I'm tracking a pack of brutes exiting the area by vehicles. They're retreating from your area. A phantom is inbound to retrieve them. I have a target lock."_

Eric looked toward Simyaldee and then thought for a moment. "Negative, Siren. Hold your fire."

"_19? What do you mean? I have visual confirmation of enemy units leaving the camp area. One shot from this ships turrets canâ€|"_"

"I said let them go." Eric added sternly. "Forget that you saw them."

"_Alrightâ€|" 19. If that's your order. Can I ask you why?"_"

"No. You can't." Eric turned and walked past Simyaldee. Simyaldee was silent and simply nodded. "Don't make me regret it."

"You will not, Chief Raynord. I will stake my life upon it. I am in your debt."

"_19, incoming transmission from Halsey."_ Siren stated on the Black Ops closed channel. _"She needs a ride south, if you have the time."_

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Hall of the Gods

> Covenant controlled segment of The Ark's upper level
 Eastern Coast of Mombasa Crater Site
> November 9, 2552<p>

Truth floated into a magnificent chamber, glowing with dozens of terminals. His brute honor guards dispersed throughout and began to examine every entrance into the room. Truth, now alone, began to scan the terminals around the room. His private communications channel opened and he eagerly accessed it.

"Do you have good news, my mighty Warhammer?" Truth stated into the channel. The video feed opened and before him stood the image of Grimleon, holding his helmet at his side. Grimleon bowed respectfully and then returned his gaze to Truth.

"_Why was I not informed that the House of Yal still stood?"_

"You know as well as I that if the House of Yal still stood it would be of no consequence. Therefore telling you was not a topic worth sharing."

"_Forgive me, noble Hierarch, but that is merely your opinion on the matter. My clan's honor demands the death of the House of Yal."_

"If you are aware that the House of Yal stands, then I can only assume you found the one that got away." Truth sighed as he rested his head upon his hands. "My mighty Warhammer, I have never stopped your insane quests, and I will not interfere this time. But be warned, the Mirrator are not as weak as the other descendants of Yal were. Do what you wish, but when the time comes for the Great Journey, be sure you are in your place."

Grimleon huffed. _ "Save your speeches for the afterlife, noble Truth. I never bowed to your Gods before, and I will not bow to them now. My Clan will now pursue the last of the House of Yal. If I am successful, I will rejoin the armada."_

"Be thankful, Warhammer. Your past deeds strengthen my patience on your tone. Just be certain that the humans are not aware of the Path of Reclamation. Destroy the Ark Data node before they can fully comprehend it."

"_You may want to send another attack wave to deal with that matter. If I was properly informed that the House of Yal still stood, then perhaps I would have been able to deal with this situation better. We failed in breaking through the human defenses. My excavation teams are still digging into the underground layer, but it will take several days. For now, I will transfer this duty to another clan."_

"Warhammer!" Truth shouted. "I gave you the order to fulfill this task. Not another."

"_My name is Grimleon! Chieftain of the Red Line Clan! You will no longer address me as your Warhammer! And until the pact of my Clan is complete, I will answer to you no longer!" _

The channel closed, and Truth sat bewildered. He glared into the space of the room, and fumbled with his thoughts. "The humans must not learn of the Path. Damn you Grimleon, you are risking everything to pursue this nonsense."

**To be continuedâ€|.
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* * *

> NOTES: The next few levels will turn the story slightly away from Earth as I begin the 'Filler' arc. These will be a short 3 level arc that will give more info on the 'House of Yal', Simyaldee's birthright, and the importance of the Sangheili Queen. Thanks for reading.
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17. Enemies and Allies

Level 17: Enemies and Allies

Northern Camp Eden
> November 10, 2552<p>

With the Brutes on the retreat, and Camp Eden now in complete control of allied forces, repairs to the shield grid began. Eden was beginning to show signs of hope. Civilian workers were allowed topside in order to begin refortifying the massive camp-city. Their main priority was to rebuild the shield which had been completely destroyed, as well as the wall and various Anti Aircraft guns.

With Siren's aid, the Brute ship was now completely under the control of the Mirrator, and the majority of all Sangheili forces moved aboard the ship in order to rest, re-coup and re-arm. A few human platoons also joined them in order to help give the ship more of an alliance feel. However, capturing the ship did not give anyone any great sense of rejoice, it was only one ship against an entire armada. At anytime, truth could send a small attack wave of ships and blow the elites out of the sky. It was only a matter of time, but for now Siren kept her eyes to the horizons; listening and watching. Two other Brute controlled ship sat in the distance, yet they did not advance or threaten the camp. They were too busy digging. Something that everyone monitored and were extremely concerned with.

Back at the southern area, near the entrance to the lower levels of Camp Eden, Eric and Mathew took the liberty of assisting the civilians in digging graves for the hundreds of fallen marines and civilian workers that hadn't escaped the brute's first attack. Their crashing ship caught everyone off guard. But Eric and Mathew couldn't spare too much time on grave detail as they had to see to the refortifications of their zones. They mainly wanted to police one body.

The sun cast a thick shadow as Mathew thumbed the dirt between his fingers and looked at the depth of the grave. Numerous plots lay about the courtyard, a make shift graveyard, and the sobs of loved

ones carried across the level field. At the base of the grave was a wrapped female body and Eric huddle atop it. Mathew couldn't stand it any longer. He stood, gripped his shovel and walked to another grave, assisting others in tossing dirt over the dead.

Eric had pulled Melanie's hand out of her white body bag and rubbed it gently between his own. She had been dead for nearly two days, but he didn't care. He knew that eventually she would be dug up again, after the war, and given a proper burial, but for now they had to dispose of the body. He didn't shed a tear. He remembered how many times Mel had held his hand. He then thought about Kim; Melanie's older sister and the core of what made Siren. He laughed at the idea of doing a brain scan of Mel, there wasn't much left of her head in order to do that, but he wouldn't put her through such an ordeal anyway. Eric hated the idea of having a friend or loved one's brain scanned. This was the main reason why he could not fully embrace Siren.

Eric's radio chirped. "_Can I see her?"_ Siren's voice radioed in his ear.

Eric stood and grabbed his helmet and then angled the faceplate toward Mel's prone form.

Siren accessed his HUD recorder and began a live feed. "_Will youâ€| will you miss her?"_

Eric found it hard to speak, his throat was tight with emotions but he couldn't shed tears. "W-what do you think?" Eric held his helmet under his left arm, while his right hand examined Mel's hand again.

"_I thinkâ€| you loved her more then you're willing to share."_

"She was family. We never talked about it, we never said anything. We simply knew â€| she was like a little sister." His throat tightened up once again. Became dry.

"_You knowâ€| she thought of you very highly. She talked about you all the time. Did you recover her will? I should up date it with the rest of the soldiers that have died in the past few weeks."_ Eric remained silent for a while as he pulled Melanie's data recorder chip from his pocket. He thumbed it in his hand and inserted it into his helmet. Siren quickly accessed it. "_Did you get the flask?"_

"Yeah." He chocked.

"_I'm glad she gave it to you. It meant a lot to her. She really loved you._" Siren paused. Being an AI, she could quickly access words to say in this situation, but there were lines of code inside her emotional subroutines that forced her to talk slowly, in breaks, to sound as though she were upset, or tearful. The silence grew as she sat and watched Mel's form. She wanted to see her, all of her, "c_an you open the bag a little more? I'd like to see the rest of her." _

"No."

"â€| _Eric. Pleaseâ€|" _

Eric sighed. "Her face is bruised beyond recognition. Her head was smashed, multiple skull fractures and severe brain trauma. You don't want your last memories of her to be this."

"_Is â€| that why you are only holding her hand?"_ Eric remained silent. Siren began to mumble, "_I never thought I would out live herâ€| she was so much stronger then I was; a better shooter, smarter, faster."_

Eric laughed, forgetting himself, "she actually did hate the idea that you became a Senior Chief before she did."

"_I should have done more. Eric, I failed her."_

"â€| no, I failed you both. She said in her will that it wasn't my fault, but it was. I brought you into this mess. I urged you all to join the core. I started this, but you all went before me. I should have died so many timesâ€| butâ€|" Eric paused. He raised his head and looked around the tight confines of the grave. He realized he wasn't talking to anyone. In his head he could hear Kim's voice, Siren's voice, but the voice was only that of an AI. His voice became stern. "Siren, turn off your emotions."

Siren replied with a heavy voice, cracking as if she were crying. "_I want to feelâ€| just for a little longer. Let me feel this. I lost my sister, Eric. We lost herâ€| "_

"She's not your sister." Eric commanded. He gently tucked Mel's hand into her wrapping and then climbed out of the grave.

Siren was silent for a moment, "_I'm sorry, 19."_ Her voice sounded more professional, less emotional. "_I should have considered your feelings in this."_ Eric began to toss dirt onto Mel, not looking at her only focusing on the dirt. Before long he had covered her completely but he was still a long way from finishing.

Mathew slowly walked back to Eric's side and began to shovel, not saying anything, only working. After a few minutes they had completely filled Mel's temporary resting spot. If humanity survived the war, she would be transferred to a family grave spot, and given full honors. Though no one would know she was a Black Ops, only that she was a soldier in the UNSC Navy.

Eric sat and wiped the sweat from his brow. Mathew passed him a canteen of water and they sat and watched as hundreds of other civilians and marines filled similar plots. The sun slowly descended into the western horizon.

Siren commented on the line. "_19, I know you need a minute to reflect, but Doctor Halsey is still waiting for an answer."_

"Tell her to get the coordinates. Then find Captain Monroe." Eric tapped his COM head set. "Simyaldee do you copy?"

"I read you, Chief Raynord."

"I need a few of your men to come with me. I have an escorting mission to the south. Can you spare Gridolee and perhaps a few grunts?"

- - - - -
Sangheili Controlled vessel: _The Hammer of God_
> Northern Camp Eden<p>

Simyaldee powered off his COM and walked to the edge of the Command platform. He looked out over the thin Sangheili command crew, and the even thinner number of human Naval officers assigned to help, it would have to be enough. "Gridolee, take a team of Unggoy and join the honorable human."

Gridolee looked up and nodded toward the second. "Immediately, sir."

Simyaldee twitched his mandibles. "Have you begun repairing your blades? You will need them."

"I repaired one. I will fix the other soon." Gridolee stated as he raced off the deck.

Simyaldee watched the door close behind his youngest warrior in the Mirratord and then turned his attention back to the COM settings. The _Fleet of Retribution_ was acquiring numbers faster and faster. The elder, below the command podium, was now in contact with dozens of other Sangheili ship masters scattered across the planet. Most were human sympathizers, and thusly agreed to continue to lend aid to the humans, but their main objective was to gather support and strike against Truth. He turned and walked toward the opposite corner, and he gasped as the pain of his recent surgery shot up his side. The surgery repaired the internal damage, but it would be a few hours until the wound completely healed.

A shout came from the communications station. "Confirmed, the Arbiter is still alive. He is moving toward the Ark structure with the Demonâ€| the Master Chief. The humans have begun to attack with the last of their mobile forces. Shall we go to their aid?"

"No. We wait." Simyaldee commanded. He was eager to get back into the battle, especially with a ship under his temporary command, but there was little chance of his forces being needed. At least not yet. For now they would stay and protect the Elders and the human's zone. Simyaldee also pondered why the Brutes were so interested in taking over the area.

The COM officer barked once again. "Sir, long distance transmission on the Seed Ship's bandwidth. Truth is not blocking this frequency. It is fromâ€| High Elder Vornaldea!"

- - - - -
Seed Ship
> November 1, 2552- -Slip Space Time difference - - nine relative hours.<p>

High Elder Vornaldea stood at the edge of a massive metal precipice. Beyond his eyes floated a fleet of ships. Nearly thirty cruisers, battleships and carriers were being repaired and modified. Dozen's of sentinel drones buzzed about the monstrous enclosure doing the work to the ships as his elite's rested. They had found the firepower they

were looking for, but instead of returning to Earth, they were ordered to another path.

Vornaldea had been struggling for hours to understand the "Path of Reclamation", but no matter how he viewed it, something was off. For once, he actually wished the human Doctor Halsey, was still around. She was filled with insightful viewpoints, and her intellect was beyond compare. She could make sense of what the Queen's forces were looking for.

Vornaldea waited patiently for the shuttle to arrive, but they had just disembarked from the Key of Deliverance only a few minutes ago. It would take an older Spirit drop ship a few minutes to cross the massive dry dock of the Seed ship.

After nearly four minutes the drop ship swung to dock with the metal platform where Vornaldea and his contingent of honor guards waited. The side bay doors opened and six massive elites strode down the ramp. Behind them floated three sentinels and a large black box. Vornaldea instantly realized the box was the stasis chamber used to house the Queen. He was approached by the most decorated warrior in the group, he stood a full heads length taller than Vornaldea, and his bulk was insanely ridged.

Commander Yalsmadee was a tower of muscle.

He knelt before Vornaldea and addressed him, "High Elder of the High Council. I am the ground forces Commander for the Fleet, Altez Yalsmadee."

"Indeed you are." Vornaldea smirked. "You remind me so much of your father, when he was younger." Vornaldea shook the thought from his mind. "Drones, take the Queen to the Ancient City." The sentinels paused and waited for an understanding of the term "Ancient City". They accessed the Seed Ships mainframe and the Keeper spoke to them, informing them where to go.

The Drones dragged the floating stasis locked box toward the main corridor. Yalsmadee turned to his team and nodded, ordering them to follow.

The Keeper spoke through a local intercom, but did not appear. "The terminology you use to describe locations is rather false, but I will not alter your words. However, this Ancient City you refer to is simply the living quarters." The Keepers voice faded.

"What was that?" Yalsmadee questioned.

"The Construct for this ship." Vornaldea replied. He motioned for Yalsmadee to follow him as they slowly made their way behind the stasis chamber. "There is much we must discuss."

"First," Yalsmadee interrupted, "you must inform me how you were able to remove the Seed Ship from its resting place. Then, I will need to know its full battle compliment and potential. It is far larger than we imagined it would be. It is nearly double the size of High Charity. We can make excellent use of this and the Construct, the one called the Keeper. Its ability to control these Drones will be needed when we arrive at Halo."

"Halo?" Vornaldea questioned.

"Yes, it must be destroyed. I am sure the Prime are now aware of our new potential and they will adjust. They always adjust." Yalsmadee was a well disciplined warrior. Vornaldea easily could comprehend this. Even though his mother, the Queen, was in an unknown state, Yalsmadee focused completely on his mission.

"Who are the Prime?" Vornaldea questioned.

"The last race of the Empire. They were an unprivileged society that had yet to be assimilated into the Empire. They taught us all that they knew."

"They had survived the Halo's first firing?"

"Yes. Their civilization was beyond the range of Halo's destructive wave. They were not full members of the Empire, though they longed to be. Since the fall of the Empire, they have watched, studied and waited for the Path of Reclamation to be fulfilled. Our Queen chose to save our kin, knowing that if the Halos fired, our race would be destroyed. After we learned that one Halo had been destroyed and we immediately sought to aid in the destructions of the others. We must stop the humans for firing Halo. They must not reach Reclamation."

Vornaldea chuckled. "You know much more than we do, but you are still not up to date. Let me inform you of the Covenant calendar, the Ninth Age of Reclamation."

After walking for nearly an hour, through the vast corridors of the Seed ship, the group arrived at the Ancient City, where the civilians who survived Dorenth's destruction lived and played. Vornaldea continued to recount the happenings of the past eighty years; the Brute alliance, the first contact with humans, the Hierarchs unquestioned path to destroy them, and the civil war.

Yalsmadee paused at the drones carried the Queen deeper into the city, watching as thousands came out to see what the new machines were doing. "Then the Hierarchs are not as stupid as we believed. We knew the humans would eventually attempt to fire Halo, it is their destiny, but this Demon, this Master Chief, destroyed Halo instead. I am somewhat confused. We feared the great journey, knowing that this was merely a fool's ploy."

"Correct." Vornaldea added.

"But the humans are not attempting to fire Halo. They are simply resisting the Covenant's advance."

"Also, correct."

"Why? The Reclaimers' destiny is to rebuild the Empire. They are defying the will of the Forerunners."

Vornaldea was not aware of this information, but assumed that this was knowledge learned through the Prime. "It would seem, that the humans wish to live. They wish to live without the Forerunners' return."

"The Quarantine station, it said that a Halo had misfired?" Yalsmadee questioned eagerly. "Who attempted to fire it? Halo can only be fired by a Reclaimer!"

"Tartarus, the Brute Chieftain. He was ordered to use a human in an attempt to fire one of the Halos."

"I see." Yalsmadee continued to follow his mother's chamber as he pondered what to do. It was taken to a highly decorated building that had been setup the moment it was known that the Queen would be coming aboard. Honor guards lined the building only allowing a select few to enter. The drones disconnected from the stasis locked box and quickly exited the building. Queen Vasmeola lay unseen, inside the black box as it floated gingerly above the center of the room. It was engulfed in a swirling orb of light, trapped between dimensions. Female elders walked into the room, carrying flowers and fine hand crafted Sangheili clothing. They lined everything neatly near the Queen's resting tomb so that when she awoke the first thing she would see would be the offerings of her people.

Yalsmadee and Vornaldea walked into the room and scanned every guard and visitor. "The Queens Honor Guards will assume her private protection. Inform the Mirrator to protect the building itself."

Vornaldea shifted slightly, "the Mirrator?"

"Yes elder, I know of them. They are my birth right after all."

Vornaldea smirked, "indeed, it was your ancestor who created the idea. However, we found it best that the Mirrator remain on Earth to assist in stopping Truth."

"The human world?" Yalsmadee once again began to think deeply on this. "Then Simyaldee is there as well?"

"Yes."

Yalsmadee turned and looked at a cloaked female with two Honor Guards at her side. She nodded respectfully and then left the building with her guards. "She is pleased to know that."

Vornaldea watched the old female depart. "Ancestors be praised, she lives. The head of the House of Yal."

Yalsmadee gripped the elders shoulder to ease his joy, and said, "There are only ten of us who know this. She has asked to remain anonymous, even amongst this great reunion. Upon my birth, she blessed me with the name of Yal and welcomed me into her home."

"Yes, you have a great weight upon your shoulders. I will contain myself in her presence. She shall have access to this building at anytime she sees fit." Vornaldea looked up at the young warrior. "I realized that you carried the name of Yal, but I did not think she still drew breath. This is a great revelation."

Yalsmadee clasped his hands behind his back and exhaled softly. "If the humans are attempting to stop Truth, then we must do what little

we can. What troubles me is our next course of action. Do we join our brothers at Earth, and try to stop Truth there? Or do we risk destroying the Ring in case Truth succeeds?"

Both Vornaldea and Yalsmadee debated this as four Huragok, the race of creatures known as engineers, floated into the room. They were watched carefully by every elite eye. The engineers extended the four tentacles and examined the Queen's state. The creatures seemed to be unaffected by the stasis barrier, something that Yalsmadee found odd. The creatures floated about, switching locations in technological bliss. The elites cautiously let them work, though they stood ready to kill the non aggressive creatures if they showed any negative acts; after all they were once the primary workers for the prophets.

It was amazing to watch them analyze and study, their tentacles flipping from control to control in absolute silence. Then they stopped working in unison. They slowly floated away from the tomb as a 3D image floated above their heads.

"My Queen!" Yalsmadee gasped as he saw Queen Vasmola's image floating above the room. It was a visual image from inside the stasis chamber. She was unconscious, or asleep, but she seemed healthy. One of the engineers floated toward the chamber and entered more information. Suddenly a visual monitor appeared showing her health readings.

"Well now, she is very healthy, as I told you." The keeper stated as he appeared in the room. His hologram emerged directly beside Vornaldea.

Yalsmadee gasped. "A Prime? The construct is one of the Prime?"

The Keeper simply smiled. "Oh, yes, I should have known you would have met them. I was modeled after my maker. He was one of the Prime." The Keeper, a biped humanoid hologram, wearing a highly decorated robe, stood before them. Its reptile skin was leathery and a long pony tail of hair stretched from its head to the floor.

"The enemy you have been fighting, is the designer of the construct?" Vornaldea questioned.

The Keeper interrupted. "The Prime were very intelligent beings, they assisted in many tasks that the Forerunner found tedious. Though they were not a part of the Empire, they were still resourceful. Remember, the Empire was glorious, and no race resisted its demands. Otherwise, the Empire unleashed its army against them. And no one wanted to be on the receiving end of the Sangheili."

"We can not trust this construct!" Yalsmadee roared.

The Keeper simply smiled. "Unlike the Monitor, I am not bound to my objectives. I will not do you any harm. After all, I created you all. It was I who oversaw the Repopulation Engine and planted your seeds. My goal is to protect, not destroy. Defend, not obliterate. You have no need to fear me child of Vastegrin."

"Vastegrin?" Vornaldea questioned. "Keeper, where did you learn this name?"

"It is not important." The Keeper smirked.

"The drones also called our Queen by this title." Yalsmadee added.

Vornaldea stared at the hologram. "Speak."

The Keeper sighed. "Vastergin is the name of your blood type sample taken from the ruling Elite during the Forerunner war. It was this blood sample that created your seed for the Repopulation Engine. There were thousands of samples, from various families, but this was the most important. Like I said, not important."

Vornaldea smirked, "as for the Prime, it would seem they were critical to the Empire during its time. I question why they wish for the Halo's to fire."

"It is because of the Path of Reclamation." Yalsmadee added. He walked closer to the stasis chamber and placed his hand close to his mother's holographic form. It lay silent on its back, unmoving, lifeless yet alive. "The Prime know that we are all carriers of the Flood."

"What?" Vornaldea questioned.

The Keeper coughed, catching the attention of the group. "If ever there was a document that should have been destroyed, that was the one. The Path of Reclamation was created as a warningâ€¦ a testament to the failures of the Empire. It was never planed to introduce the â€¦ soldier gene as you call it, into the populace. The Path of Reclamation is a warning, a guide, a map, a collection of tools needed by the Reclaimers in order to assist them in rebuilding the Empire. To teach them how not to make the same mistakes the Forerunners did."

Vornaldea walked closer to the Queens chamber and crossed his arms in thought. "I will need to investigate this more thoroughly, as well as our science teams. However, I will add that the humans have no desires of firing the Halo weaponsâ€¦"

"I would think differently," the Keeper said, "they have not fully understood this rather interesting piece of Forerunner work. The Path of Reclamation can easily remind them of how â€¦ pointless it is to find a cure. Your human friend, Catherine Halsey stumbled upon what she thought could be a cure. If she were familiar with the Path of Reclamation, she would understand it was pointless."

"Then we will need for her, as well as the humans, to understand the Path of Reclamation." Vornaldea stated.

"No," countered Yalsmadee, "telling them would only remind them of their purpose. We can not risk it. The Forerunners were wise in choosing the humans, they are smart and powerful, and would be equally ferocious in battle as the Brutes. Humans, as the Prime told us, are exceptional weapons." Yalsmadee faced Vornaldea, "if it is true that we have formed and awkward alliance with them, then we must pray that they never understand the Path of Reclamation completely. If they do â€¦ ancestors have mercy on us."

"I worked with Doctor Halsey for many days, understanding this ship

and the cloning process." Vornaldea sighed. "Your thinking is much like the Prophets. The humans wish only to survive. It was we who attacked them. At these turn of events, I do not question the human's anger toward us, but I know that we need each other."

Yalsmadee looked to the Keeper after briefly thinking over Vornaldea's words. "Keeper. Tell meâ€| whom do you trust more, to complete your Forerunner plans?"

"Why, the Reclaimers of course. It is their duty to end the Flood threat."

"Now tell me why. Why do you so fully support the Reclaimers?"

The Keeper smiled. "Because â€|they will remember and they willâ€| seek the path."

Yalsmadee looked back to Vornaldea. "High Elder. We chose to destroy the Halo's to eliminate any chance of the humans seeking this pathâ€| the Path of Reclamation. To them, it will be the only option left. If they understand, or learn the truth of the Flood spore, we are all doomed. If I sound like the Prophets, then forgive me. But I will agree on one thing. Truth was correct in fearing them."

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A few hours passed and Yalsmadee sat alone in his mother's room. There was little more he could do to convince the High Elder about being cautious with the humans, but the Elder was feeling sympathetic to what his race had been ordered to do to them. Yalsmadee shared no such regret. He almost agreed with Truth, but the thought of agreeing to the Prophets actions of genocide made him gag.

He paced around the stone structure as virtual nighttime began. The room's lights adjusted and the crystal overhanging the city dimmed to only a moonlit glow. He walked to the window and looked outward at the young Sangheili playing in the streets. From the Queen's room he could overlook the entire city and lakes beyond, and even see the ship's massive doors into the ship area.

The Seed Ship was a perfect escape for his kin, but it was not a full world. Eventually the Sangheili race would once again flourish, and the Seed ship would not be big enough to support them all. He had been told about High Charity, the central home of the Covenant, and how many races lived upon the ship as if it were a home. He never comprehended how that could be possible, but the Seed ship clearly exemplified it.

A Dabdough walked the edge of a nearby lake, it was a male. He had been told stories of those creatures as well. The six foot tall creatures were timid but gave a good hunt for the young. They breed rapidly with their powerful female counterparts, so their numbers were always in good supply. He never had the chance to hunt the creature. Yalsmadee was born far on the other side of the galaxy, and he longed to take a part in the old Sangheili traditions of his home. To walk the streets of the Academy in the Parade of the Watchmen, to attend classes with other Sangheili and learn the techniques of being a warrior, history, to take the Trials of the Watchmen and prove his worthiness to the council and his kin. He wanted to prove his right to be a warrior and do everything that was denied him thanks to the

Prophets.

Yalsmadee turned to look at his mother's hologram, "it must have been difficult for you, mother, to be an outcast and shunned simply because you were a female and the head of the oldest House. I look around and I see what you mean by everything being dominated by us males, it has helped me to understand your anger and determination. We will start over. Once we have ended the Prophets plans, and destroyed Halo and the Flood, we will build the Sangheili race in the way you have dreamt it. Equal."

A group of four females entered the room, catching Yalsmadee's attention. They carried foods, drink, and fresh clothing. "Commander," the lead female spoke, "I took notice that you have not left the Queen's side all day. We have brought you food and drink. I will take your armor and clean it for you."

She placed clothing on the table in the corner of the room as the other females left the food in the center of the room. She stood quietly to the side and waited for his orders.

Yalsmadee was unaccustomed to the typical roles of the Sangheili women, he had been surrounded by warriors all of his life, even the women of the fleet fought. "Thank you. But I do not need my armor cleaned. I wear these scratched and tears with honor, as it is my proof of being a warrior."

The female bowed and turned to exit the room. Yalsmadee spoke up, "Wait. Tell me, why you have done this? I could acquire food of my own."

The female turned, her head low, "Warriors do not have time to do medial tasks. We who are female, are here to aid you in your strength, and to make sure you do not forget to take care of yourself and your enemy. We are your aid."

"Thank you."

She nodded her head softly and exited the room.

Yalsmadee chuckled as he sat beside the food and began to tear the meat from the bone of a foreign beast. He swallowed water and looked to his mother's hologram, laughing uncontrollably. "Mother, I could never see you living like that." Yalsmadee ate his fill talking to the hologram that represented his mother's slumbering form.

On the Bridge of the Seed Ship, Head Elder Vornaldea peered into his terminal and began to record his words. "This message is for the Arbiter, the Mirrator First and Second, and any Elders stationed on Earth. At this moment, I must state that we are not sure if the humans can be fully trusted. The forerunners left a database of information called the Path of Reclamation. It is important that the Humans understand that they can NOT seek the Path. They must not follow the guidelines established in the Path of Reclamation. Help them to understand that we will fight the Flood to the very end, to the last of our Kin can no longer stand. Truth must be stopped, but the Path of Reclamation is not the only option.

"If the humans attempt to follow the guidelines in the Path of Reclamation, we fear they may seek the destruction of everything."

My Brothers, the line of allies is growing thin. Please, respond when you receive this transmission."

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Back on Earth, several miles away from Eden, two people stood in the center of a circle of Section III Military Police. With the police is the young woman that had served with doctor Halsey, she had chased the two runaway scientists to this point.

"Put the guns down, both of you. Where are you going?" She pleaded with her fellow scientists.

And MP shouted, "Drop the weapons, doctors. We have orders to bring you back to the Box." The MPs took aim with Battle Rifles at the two scientists holding handguns.

The older male scientist held a magnum at his side and looked back at the group of MPs and Doctor Halsey's aid. "Don't you realizeâ€¦ the flood have already been on Earth. They landed, even if we can't see them anymore, they were hereâ€¦ we're all doomed. We're already dead." He placed the gun to his temple and fired before anyone could talk him out of it.

The young woman at his side, covered in the man's blood, knelt down, trembling, and picked up the gun. She looked back at Doctor Halsey's aid, "Did you watch it, Anne? Did you see the Path of Reclamation? Did you watch it all?"

Anne held her breath, in complete shock at what she had just saw one of her teammates do. "Noâ€¦ Doctor Halsey sent me after youâ€¦ she was afraid youâ€¦ that you would be a risk. Kateâ€¦ put the gun down. Please."

Kate, the young scientist that worked with Halsey, looked at the MPs and Anne, "I don't want to be a monsterâ€¦ Anne." A tear trickled from her eyes, "Six daysâ€¦. You only have six days left. Thisâ€¦ this is the only way."

"Kate!" Anne screamed as the young woman raised the gun to her temple. There was a loud pop and Kate's lifeless form crumbled to the sand.

One of the MPs clicked on his short wave COM. "Control, this is Section III team 4. Doctors Jet Kim and Kate Smith have taken their own lives."

"_Godâ€¦ did you see what happened?_"

"Yes sir. We tried to talk them down, but no go. I have a full recording."

"_Good, bag the bodies and bring them in."_

Anne collapsed to her knees holding her sides and cried as the MPs pulled two large bags over the lifeless forms at their feet. They then loaded their bodies and helped Anne back into her warthog.

**To be Continuedâ€¦.
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> NOTES: I decided to keep the last segment in order to help shorten the length of the filler levels. This level as well as the next two will seem a bit slower then normal, but they will be good character points in them. There might be some awkwardness in the next few levels as well, but we will quickly get back to the main story and wrap things up. Stay tuned and thanks for reading.
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18. Preparing for the last stand

****Level 18: Preparing for the last stand****

Brute Camp

> Sixty Miles West of Camp Eden
 November 10, 2552

The Red Clan gathered together in the center of the camp. A fire raged amongst the various group packs, but the brutes all came together at the massive fire of their Chieftain. Grimleon, the former Warhammer of Truths attack force, gathered his kin, his clan.

The nighttime sky sparkled overhead, dimmed by the blaze of the fire that they encircled. Smoke sailed high as the unarmored brutes roared with the excitement of the feast to come. Snarls, roars and growls of excitement signaling the bond they all shared of being from one clan, one powerful clan. The meaty animal roasted in the pit. The humans called it an Elephant, but whatever, it was meat and the Red Clan was hungry. The succulent fatty juicy spilled into the flame and sent the aroma into the wind. A heavenly smell and the brutes drooled for it.

Grimleon paced about the camp. He was uneasy. An enemy he once thought extinct, hoped was gone, had resurfaced. Had he made the right choice in letting him heal? With each passing generation, the House of Yal grew stronger. This Sim'yald, this Mirrator Elite, was wounded but still proved to be a highly skilled combatant. There was no honor in killing him if he was not at his best. The House of Yal had always been worthy prey, and this would be no different.

Grimleon smiled.

His clans roar grew as he approached the cooking meat. They silenced slightly as he stood in front of the beast and smelled it. "Its smell fills me with delight." He said as he turned to his clan. "The Red Clan has grown thin in these few days of fighting the humans, but we will no longer sway to the Hierarchs wishes until our own goals are met. We will find the last of the House of Yal and it will be his flesh that we next feed upon." The younger brutes cheered as Grimleon slammed his fist into his thick chest. His graying fur stood on end from the power. He turned and ripped the cooked elephants trunk off and sank his teeth into the perfectly cooked meat. He tore off a hunk and roared in approval. Once the chieftain had taken the first bite, the rest of the clan joyfully fought to take pieces of their own.

The feast had begun, and the next day would bring the joy of battle.

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The Hammer of God
> November 10, 2552<p>

Simyaldee stretched, his wounds were finally fully healed, and he began to do a light workout in order to work the kinks out. With his twin Mirratord blades extended, Simyaldee did the basic combat techniques taught to him by Commander Vadumee. Relying on speed and flexibility, Simyaldee danced around the training room without concern of his surroundings. Each move was graceful, powerful, and frighteningly fast. His hoofs were in perfect control, each placement exact and never off stride. His arms responded flawlessly and his vision was crystal clear. For the first time since they had arrived on Earth, Simyaldee felt whole.

Simyaldee did his work out without any armor on. He wanted to feel the rhythm of his movements. Sweat dripped from his pores and stood in a relaxation pose. He breathed deep as he let his arms hang slightly to the side, but not fully limp. He held his head back, looking up so that air ways would be fully relaxed. He breathed slowly, under control, and in a steady rhythm.

The door opened behind him and he didn't bother to look at who it was. He focused on his breathing, but powered off his twin blades. "Yes?"

"Second, Gridolee is reporting in." The lower ranking Mirratord replied. "He says that they have disembarked with the honorable human. They will be out of radio range in several minutes. Are they any orders for him?"

Simyaldee lowered his head and turned to face the young warrior. "Tell himâ€¦ to fight always with honor, respect and penitence." Simyaldee wiped his brow with the back of his hand and began to dress. The young Mirratord officer left the room, not sure what the Second meant by his words. Such things were the basics of the Mirratord, something that should not need to be reminded, but he did not question the Second. No one questioned Simyaldee.

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Ark Excavation site // Mombasa observatory
> ONI Facility Bravo A-11092G: The Gatekeeper
 November 10, 2552

Kelly sat naked on a bench, water dripping from her still wet form. She held her head low as stared into the metal floor. It had been a long day with numerous armor changes, and lots of testing. Rose was a slave driver, but her attentions were good. She was determined to unlock the secret of the Reclaimer armor, and after finally uncovering how to use of the under armor it was now a race to figure out the trick to making it work.

Kelly was not physically exhausted, she was mentally worn out. The new suit designs and configurations to the under armor relayed directly into her, similar to her old armor, however the speed of which everything responded was incredibly fast. She was finding it hard to keep up with the suit on a mental level.

"Doc Halsey will clear it up." A voice stated from the door. Kelly hadn't realized someone had walked in. She looked up as Rose walked towards her. "Once she gets here, she'll know what to do. I'm at my limit. There's nothing more I can do without a better understanding of how the current flows with your unique genetic code." Rose sat beside Kelly and was dwarfed by the female Spartan's seven foot frame. "The under suit I modified allows for the gel layer and your body to regulate the power for the Mark VI, but â€¦ I'm missing something."

Kelly sighed and stood as she began to dry off with a towel. "Until Doctor Halsey arrives, I'll go assist the Spartan III's. Those shield placements you added should give them a little more staying power in combat."

"It's not the same as a Mark VI shield unit, but it will hold against direct fire. They just need to remember that it is only one directional, forward. They are exposed in the rear."

"You've told them that plenty of times. They understand. That's why I'm working with them. They need to be able to use their shield enhancements as if they were second nature." Kelly walked toward her locker and grabbed the modified under armor and began the tedious method of putting it on. Rose sat silently on the bench.

After a few minutes Kelly fastened the final strap and began to move toward her armor, but noticed that Rose hadn't move. "Ma'am, is there anything else you need from me?"

Ma'am? Kelly was older than she was. "No. I was just lost in my thoughts. Wesley sent me a message saying that the Black Ops and a few Elites are in route with Halsey."

"The Black Ops are leaving Eden?"

"The Mirratord will guard it until Eric gets back."

"Then what's the problem?"

"Eric's coming."

"Yes. He is the leader of the Black Ops."

Rose looked at Kelly and sighed. She wished she could see it that simple. Rose didn't see Eric as just the Black Ops leader, he wasâ€¦ more. "You're right." Rose forced a smile. "I'm thinking too much about it."

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Several levels above the Spartan training area, Wesley paced around the room. It was a steel room with dim blue lights on one wall, and a several video displays on another. The round table where he and Colonel Ackerson sat still had a warm cup of coffee sitting upon it. He was waiting to debrief the one woman that had ever made him feel inferior.

The door parted and a congregation of six highly decorated Non-Com officers entered. Following them was Major Elizabeth Rawlings. Wesley

powered on the light over the round table and saluted as they approached. Several of the men and women sat at the table, but Major Rawlings sat on leather couch to the side. Wesley thumbed his suit and made sure it was firmly pressed and adequate. He hadn't made a speech like this since his first assignment; which was following Rose while she was being recruited for the Mark VI project.

Wesley pressed a button on the wall and a door on the opposite side of the room opened. In walked several women in formal dress carrying trays of snacks and data pads to take meal orders from the Brass. Grilled tuna seemed to be the big request.

As the young ladies departed with the Brass's orders, Wesley turned to Major Rawlings and she stood at his side. He hated her. She made his guts quiver. She made him come to the Gateway in order to deliver his 'final' report. Final, the word seemed to echo in young Wesley's mind.

Major Rawlings raised her nose to the group at the table, "Good afternoon Ladies and Gents, I hope you don't mind if we keep this meeting as informal as possible, considering the nature of why we are here. For the past three months the Black Ops have been â€| watched, for lack of a better term." Several of the Brass seemed stunned.

"Black Ops?" A older man with glasses questioned. He wore the strips of an Air Force Chief of Staff. "Never heard of them." Others nodded in agreement.

"Without question," Rawlings continued, "I would be surprised if you had. I was only informed of them several hours after the destruction of New Mombasa last month. But I will try to stay on point. The Black Ops were being watched by one of Section III's inside men." She turned and looked at Wesley. "He is an agent that you are all quiet familiar with. I certain each of you have in some way included him within your payrolls." Rawlings turned and walked back to her couch. She sat, crossed her long legs and adjusted her skirt. "You have the floor, Wesley."

Wesley sighed. "Sirs, forgive my untimely report. The mission with Charley Company and Red Squad lasted far longer then expected, and once we returned to Earth I realized that had to do my part in helping protect Camp Eden."

One of the Navy Brass leaned closer. She was an older woman roughly the same age as Rawlings. "You reported to me last week that the Sangheili Homeworld was destroyed." She adjusted her glasses and read from a data pad in her hand. "A Gravemind form had completely taken over the planet, with the aid of the â€| Mirratord, the creature was held back long enough for the Seed Ship to be filled with Sangheili Civilians and fled. The planet was then destroyed by our prototype stealth ship the Rogue Fantasy. They deployed a Nova bomb on the planet's surface."

Another member of the brass blurted out, "The Rogue Fantasy? Wasn't that the ship that Lord Hood ordered to break off from the Fleet in order to intercept Truth?"

The female member of the Navy Brass replied. "Yes. It was destroyed several minutes later. The Master Chief and several valuable officers

survived."

"What about the Seed Ship?" Another member questioned.

"It is completely under the control of the Sangheili." Wesley firmly stated. "Currently beyond Sol space."

The room was quiet. Wesley was aware that several of the members of this board desperately wanted to capture the Seed Ship. It was the reason why the Black Ops were sent to Dorenth with the Rogue Fantasy secretly in tow. He looked back at Rawlings and she smiled smugly. Wesley knew that she was also one of the ones that wanted the Seed ship, along with Ackerson.

A man from the front of the table sighed heavily and began to smoke on a cigar. "So what you're saying to us, is that humanity is on the verge of extinction, and the only way to save our live is under the control of the stinking Split lips? This is a bad joke."

"They are our allies, sir. They left some of their best warriors behind in order to help. Including the Arbiter."

"Allies?" The man laughed. "Son, let me explain to you the thin line between a Truce and an Alliance. A Truce means we won't kill each other so long as we have a common enemy. An Alliance means we won't kill each other so long as we both get what we want. Screw what the text books say. And forgive my tongue, but I have no planes to be Allies with those elite bastards. This is a Truce. Truce! If we survive this, my boys will easily turn their guns at those big four jawed freaks and wipe the mud with'em."

"Sir." Wesley commented. "I hate them as well, but they are the sole reason we are still able to fight."

The man pulled his cigar from his lips and stood from the table. "The sole reason we are still what?" He was angry. Angry to be told that humanity wasn't strong enough. Wesley could feel the tension on the man. He was a Brigadier General, and Career Marine, and to be told that his forces weren't up to the challenge was a direct slap to the face. Screw the facts, this man prided himself in being the best, his soldiers were the best, and he didn't care if all of humanity died because his Marines would still be the best.

"Calm yourself, Douglas." Another Marine General added. "We came here to hear what we didn't know. Let's let the boy talk." The General sat down, but noticed the Wesley didn't flinch at his threat. The other General then added. "Tell me about this Mirrator, and the Black Ops."

Wesley turned to Rawlings. She nodded, approving him to relinquish classified intel. "Sir, the Mirrator can best be described as a military secret service. From what I've learned of them, they do not-did not take orders from the Prophets. They answered directly to the elite's governmental bodyâ€|"

"The Sangheili High Council." Rawlings added.

Wesley agreed. "Yes. The Council. They work much like the Spartan IIs. However, their fighting method is mostly in stealth. They also exist within different ranks of the elite military, occupying status'

as Rangers, Zealots, Ship Masters, and Spec Ops. In factâ€¦" Wesley turned to a video on the wall skipped to a section and froze it on a picture of a white armored elite. "This is the leader of the Mirratord. He is called the First."

"That would be R'tas Vadumee." The female Navy brass added. "He was with Sergeant Major Johnson when they first arrived back on Earth, along with the Arbiter. Does this mean that we should not trust him, or this Mirratord?"

"No ma'am. On the contrary. I suggest we trust the Mirratord more than we trust the normal elites." Wesley exhaled. "The Mirratord have an honor system which is deeply rooted in the traditions of their race. They thrive in combat, but are loyal to the death. If they plan to betray us, they will, in fact, tell us." Wesley hesitated to talk about the Black Ops but found his nerve. "The Black Ops â€¦ were the test subjects for Ackerson's Spartan III program."

"Test subjects?" A Colonel in the back of the table questioned. "Everything about the Spartan III is based on Halsey's studies, correct?"

"No Sir." Wesley felt a warm hand on his shoulder and he stepped to the side.

Major Rawlings stood in his place. "Do you all remember then EaMP Program submitted under the guidelines of one Doctor Carolyn Smith and Colonel James Ackerson?" Several of the Brass nodded in agreement. "That program was designed to provide more super soldiers, not quite Spartans, in under six months. It was a success. Howeverâ€¦ Doctor Smith violated every surgical law known to us." Wesley glared at Rawlings sternly. She was blaming Doctor Smith? Doctor Smith was following orders, Ackerson's orders! He wanted to protest, but what good could the protest of a spy do in a room full of so many high ranking Military big wigs?

Rawlings added. "She used cloned tissue samples from the Spartan's in order augment the fifty volunteer soldiers in the project. Twenty-five survived."

"Major Rawlings." The room fell silent as an older man sighed from the edge of the table. Of the group he was the only Navy man without a rank. His suit was clean giving him no indication of name. Like Wesley, he was a spook, and judging by everyone's response to him he was a man that ranked high. "I remember when Ackerson pitched this idea to ONI. I remember how desperate he was to out class Halsey and get the money for that grant to do his research. I was the head man in charge of overseeing the Castle Facility on Reach. I clearly recall all of the blood samples that Ackerson had my men â€¦ acquire from Halsey's lab." The man looked at Rawlings; his face stone. "Doctor Smith is a mere patsy in this dilemma-none the less, she is a part of his, meaning Ackerson, crimes. The Black Ops proved that successful muscle recovery can be performed. The Spartan's III survival rate was tremendously high because of what Carolyn Smith learned."

Wesley felt vindicated.

Major Rawlings flexed her jaw and exhaled calmly. "The surviving members of the EaMP program were cleared for activity duty and

classified into the ONI Black Ops initiative. They were dead. They no longer existed. Their history files were wiped and they were given deep space operations."

The female Navy officer perked at this information. "So that was what the Rogue Fantasy was used for. The ship was built and never fully commissioned. I knew it was ONI project, but you can imagine my surprise when it was suddenly shot down over Western Kenya a few weeks ago, as I never recalled the Secretary of the Navy actually commissioning it."

"Yes." Rawlings added. "The ship was never fully commissioned, to avoid the paper work and keep the ship off the official roster. According to all records the ship was still docked at Mars awaiting commission." Rawlings picked up a cup of coffee. She knew this discussion was headed into a direction she didn't want to go. But there was no denying that the group was going to put the pieces together. "The Black Ops duty was to observe the Covenant and there actions. When our forces abandoned a world, the Black Ops went it to watch what the Covenant would do."

The female Navy officer pulled up a data pad and examined her notes. "Major, I have six ships showing "Dry Dock" status and "to-be-commissioned." Do we have more Black Operations in action?"

Major Rawlings sipped her coffee. This was bad. Not the coffee, but the discussion. "Commander Hue. Forgive me for being formal, as I said that I would like this meeting to be as informal as possible. This is an exception." Rawlings put down her cup of coffee and stood at full attention. "Commander. Under the grounds of ONI code Beta. I can not state for you the status of those ships. Sir!"

Commander Hue and several other naval brass stood, stunned. "There are six ships, Major!" Hue roared.

"We are on the verge of being extinct!" Another man fumed. "To hell with ONI codes and this Black Ops bull! We need every man!"

Another officer blurted. "Section III authority Beta. Classification OMEGA. You will tell us everything you know, Rawlings! Now!"

The Major turned to Wesley and smiled. "Would you be so kind as to leave the room and stand guard at the door? No one must enter until I call for you. Code Six."

Wesley stood. Saluted and walked to the door. Major Rawlings held her smile the entire time. Wesley exited the room closed the door and held his post. His stomach tightened and he leaned into a trash can, spilling what little breakfast he had eaten. He wiped his mouth and stood firm. Wesley was aware that ONI had Secrets, but he had no idea that ONI had secrets within its own organization. His stomach was doing twists. He had just stood before a firing squad, and Rawlings gratefully took his place. And she seemed unfazed. What was he doing here?

The officers that were preparing meals began to approach with plates of food. Wesley put up his hand, halting them, and pulled out his sidearm; letting it hang at his side. "Take the food back and keep it warm. I'll call you when you can enter." The young women were stunned

to see him holding his sidearm. Wesley took notice of their shock and added, "Code Six." They suddenly understood. The words being spoken in that room were top secret. Hearing them without clearance would result in death. Code Six was a general ONI order for anyone below a B grade rating to stay away, and Wesley had full right to shoot anyone that attempted to defy that order. He wasn't worried though, he kept his safety on.

Minutes ticked by and Rawlings opened the door. "Stand down. We're done. But everyone's hungry. Is lunch ready yet?"

"Uh? Yes ma'am." Wesley seemed bewildered. He wanted to ask how it went but before he mustered the words he was already moving toward the kitchen.

Shockingly, Major Rawlings was following him. "Ma'am, you don't have to come with me. I can at least handle this much."

Major Rawlings waited until they were near the door and she smiled at Wesley. "I am sorry." She placed his hands into her own and looked down at Wesley. Wesley had forgotten how tall she was until right at that moment. "I only wanted what was best-what I thought was best for everyone. Once everyone is done eating, I need you to go up to the landing bay and await Halsey and the Black Ops. When 19 arrives bring him here. Don't hesitate. Everyone inside will be waiting for him." She looked into Wesley's eyes and smiled again. "I am terribly sorry." She turned and walked down and opposite hallway toward the elevator.

Wesley shook off the odd sensation he had just received from the Major and walked into the kitchen to bring the brass their meals.

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The door to the Elevator closed and Major Rawlings leaned back against the wall. There was silence with the exception of the humming elevator hydraulics. She was going down to the lower levels, to see Kelly. She had to hurry, despite the fact that time was already crucial, she had to hurry. She wiped a tear from her eyes, sniffled, and tried to forget the meeting. She had to push past it. She told herself that it could have been worse.

No. That was a lie. This was the worst possible scenario.

The elevator reached the lower level and as the door opened she could hear the sound of muffled weapons fire. She walked into the vehicle bay and motioned toward the work areas. The sound of power tools echoed throughout. She watched as Rose examined a table of parts, most likely Mark VI variant pieces. She looked around even more. The weapons fire was coming from the test cave beyond the wall. She walked near the bullet proof window and watched as a steel clad Spartan II, with over twenty years of combat experience, ran the course against three Spartan IIIs.

Rawlings smiled as she watched Kelly run circles around the Spartan IIIs. She was faster, more agile, and a better shot. The Spartan III and their SPI armor could instantly camouflage themselves with the rocks of the cave, but their limited experience cost them greatly. Kelly was always a step ahead of them. Even cloaked she could find them, and not Even Rawlings was able to figure it out. Then she

noticed that the Spartan III's had shields.

"Shields on the SPI armor?" She questioned aloud.

"You like it?" Rose added as she walked up to the Major's side.

Rawlings looked away, made sure her eyes were dry and then turned back to Rose. "The SPI armor can't support a shield generator. How did you bypassâ€¦"

"I didn't." Rose smirked. "They are basically modified Jackal shield units. I affixed each of the SPI armors with a self charging Jackal Unit. The R.D. unit here has several hundred on reserve. But in order to have them recharge, I did tap into the SPI armors' power cell. The energy drain is nominal. The only side effect is that the shield is only in the front. They are still exposed from the side and back."

"But still, this is a great advancement." Rawlings was pleasantly shocked. Rose was stunned. "This will give them more of a fighting chance. I'm glad my Body Guards can be of some use to Kelly now."

"Glad you like it. According to Kelly, they are sharp, and better than the average Marine, but they are green. They only know combat training, and not the real thing. Plus, Kelly thinks that Kate may be a little too aggressive. She's out to prove something."

"Kate, G017, yes, she has a bit of a temper. She wants to fight, and hates the idea of being a bodyguard. But she never questions and order."

Rose was silent. She had never heard Major Rawlings talk soâ€¦ casually.

Rawlings exhaled slowly. "I hate to interrupt their training, but I need to talk with Kelly."

Rose pressed the cave intercom. "Kelly, Major Rawlings is here. She needs to talk with you."

Kelly didn't have to say a word, and even if she had no one would have heard it, but the expression she gave as she trotted back to the garage door clearly read 'why her?'

The door parted and Kelly stood at complete attention before Major Rawlings. "Spartan 087, reporting as ordered.."

Rawlings seemed to chock. "How goes the modifications?"

"Ma'am, they are progressing smoothly. Doctor Santos could explain it more thoroughly. Sir."

"I â€¦ wanted to ask you. To hear it from you." Rawlings grabbed Kelly by the hand and attempted to pull Kelly into a more private location. Kelly didn't move. "Would you please follow me?"

"Ma'am. I have work to do."

"Kellyâ€¦"

"Major. If this is not pertaining to the training of the S IIIs or preparations for stopping Truth, then there is nothing much we have to say." Kelly paused, putting her attitude in check.
"Sir."

Rawlings turned her back to Kelly and lowered her head. "Iâ€¦ wanted to askâ€¦ to ask you." Rawlings was silent for a moment. She then turned and faced Kelly. Kelly could see the red in her eyes; the pain in her. "Spartan 087," She said more formally. "You have new orders. At Zero Nine Hundred tomorrow morning, you and Doctor Halsey will be reporting to the last known coordinates of Blue Team. They were headed to the ZETA Doradus System, a Planet called ONYX. Blue team was able to send one last transmission before we lost contact. They are between Slip Space."

"Ma'am?" Kelly seemed confused. "Why am I â€¦"

"Those are your orders! Spartan!" Rawlings was firm. "You will go, with Halsey, and you will uncover why they are missing."

"Sir. I can not accept those ordersâ€¦."

"Then you will spend the rest of this war in a brig!" Rawlings glared into Kelly Reflexive EVA mask. "You have until then to help Rose figure out what needs to be done with the Reclaimer armor."

"What in the hell?" Rose screamed. "Then why did you bring us here if you aren't going to give us enough time to finish?"

"Things change, Miss Santos." Rawlings walked toward Rose, and towered over her. "We made new discoveries, new evidence. Nothing ever goes as planned in the middle of a war. And unfortunately, we can not rely on our future plans. If the Master Chief and the Arbiter fails, humanity will be extinct. Kelly and Halsey are the only ones who have had direct contact with that Forerunner Seed Ship and numerous other Forerunner installations besides the Halos."

Rawlings walked away, moving toward the elevator door. "We received a warning from the Elite fleet, Simyaldee sent word this morning. We have stumbled upon something that we must not fully explore. We must not seek the path. That is all that Simyaldee could really on the hard line from Eden. Halsey will explain it more once she arrives."

"But you said that we only haveâ€¦" Rose blurted out, but Rawlings cut her off.

"Halsey will be landing within the hour. Once the Brass is done with her, she will report to you. But she will be leaving at Zero Nine Hundred tomorrow, as well as Spartan 087. I advise you to become more comfortable with the Spartan IIIs."

Rose ran toward the Elevator but it closed before she could get there. She slammed her hands against the door and cursed, "You bitch!" She turned and looked at Kelly. "What is going on? You can't possibly be leaving Earth? We need you!"

Kelly turned to walk back into the training area. "I have my orders,

Rose. And so do you. We don't have time to question them."

Rose kicked a bucket and stormed back toward her work desk.

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Rawlings cried. She put her hands to her face and struggled to hold back her outcries, but nothing could hold it in. She hoped to God that she had done the right thing. She had to do something before her time was up. This was her only intervening act on the ONI board's decision. She dried her eyes on her sleeve as she arrived on the main floor.

The door parted and two men stood at the hallway as she stepped off the elevator. It was Wesley and the other ONI spook without a rank. Rawlings forced a smile as a tear rolled from her eye.

"Wesley. Do you accept my apology?" She quivered, showing a rare amount of human frailty.

Wesley lowered his head and then looked up at her through his brows. "Yes Sir, I do." Although, judging by his tone, it appeared to be a lie.

The other spook, the older man wearing an unmarked Navy uniform stepped forward. "On the crime of deceiving ONI Section III, how do you plea?"

Rawlings choked, as she placed her hand to her mouth. Had it really come to this? She forced back her emotions and stood tall. "Guilty." She said with a trembling voice.

"On the crime of lying to the Section III board and the Chief of Staff Committees, how do you plea?" He added.

"I was trying to ensure the future of humanityâ€¦." Rawlings muffled.

"How do you plea?" He questioned again, ignoring her statement.

"â€¦ guilty." Major Rawlings was clearly shaken.

"Indeed you are guilty, Major Rawlings." The man added. "With the rights given to me by Section III and the Joint Chiefs, and the Board, and Major Standishâ€¦."

"Standish?" Rawlings muttered softly.

The man continued, "I am here to deliver your sentencing." The man held up a data pad and summarized what he read. "Perjury, theft of military personal and equipment, and aiding in the classification of Black Ops projects without consent of the board." The man passed Wesley his data pad and pulled up his side arm. He flicked off his safety and his face became rigid. "May God have mercy on your soul."

Major Rawlings starred into the weapon. And beyond. She saw the middle aged Major round the corner, his hands firmly crossed and glared at her without pity. Major Standish. His ability to survive thrived on the failures of others. Rawlings let her thoughts consume

her, in that short moment before her private execution, and she glared into the three men that were watching her. She let her mind race back to Kelly, her only living blood relative, and the last full Reclaimer. For a brief moment Rawlings felt peace. Kelly was alive. Her niece was alive. Even though Kelly hated her and didn't care about the call of being a Reclaimer, Rawlings knew that she would be leaving the hopes of humanity in the right hands.

She never heard the gun fire, but it did.

The unranked ONI spook pocketed the weapon and examined Major Rawlings still form. "She's dead. Punishment carried out." Wesley felt sorry for the Major. He didn't like her, but she didn't deserve this. The man walked up to Wesley and looked at him. "Get someone to clean this up."

Wesley voiced, "She simply made the wrong decisions. She never deserved this. She was a soldierâ€¦ she's human. We can't simply kill our own so easily."

"She was a commissioned officer for the UNSC â€¦ and an ONI operative. She's broken more rules than a demon in a church. And she rightfully denied to share with us any information that she had that could assist us in â€¦." The man paused as his eyes made contact with Major Standish standing at the far end of the hallway. The ONI spook looked back to Wesley, "clean it up, Wesley, and then get back to your post." He walked past Wesley and looked to see that Major Standish had already left.

He looked back at Wesley and added. "Don't feel sorry for her. The board made the decision, not us. She'll be buried with full honors and called a hero, because officiallyâ€¦ she was KIA. Everything we do is considered Black, Wesley. You break your oath to the board, and you'll end up just like her." The spook walked away.

Wesley lowered his head, leaned against the wall, and prayed; thankful that he was still alive.

It could have been him on that floor.

****To be continued.****

* * *

>Note: Running short on time, so I didn't do a detailed job editing this. There is perhaps one last filler chapter before we get back into the main story. Also, there was a slight change to the ending, from when I posted on the Bungie forums. Hope you're enjoying these slow, but informational chapters.
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19. The Man and the Myth

****Level 19: The Man and the Myth****

Ark Excavation site // Mombasa observatory
> ONI Facility Bravo A-11092G: The Gatekeeper
 November 11, 2552

The whine of two pelicans soared into the New Mombasa skyline. Below

them a monstrous cavern carved by the Covenant warships, and exposing the ancient Forerunner structure beneath. That structure was the Ark. Its mighty hull expanding much further than anyone had thought possible. Yet now it sits under the complete control of Truth's conquest. Rain had been drenching the area for nearly ten hours, casting a near wall of water in the path of the approaching human forces.

Using the cover of night and the heavy downpour of rain, the two pelicans maintained a steady forward speed, hoping to completely avoid detection.

"Brute patrol on the northern border." The lead Pelican pilot radioed to the trailing bird.

"Negative. That's a decoy unit. Our unit. LZ is clear." The second pilot replied.

"Confirm coordinates. Mark."

"Active ping to Global set."

"I have a beacon."

"_Be advised, Banshee patrols spotted near Zulu." _ The Gateway decoy unit reported into the pelicans' radios.

"Drop count?" The lead pilot radioed back. She wanted to know how many she could shoot down in order to land.

"_Negative. Negative Drop Count. Silent approach. Go Black at the beacon."_ The ground decoy unit radioed back.

Eric heard the code. Adjusted in his seat and breathed a heavy sigh. They had been flying low for nearly seven hours, and his patience was wearing thin. He didn't like this. There was nearly zero visibility outside, ONI had moles all over the New Mombasa creator, there was no sign of the Master Chief or the Arbiter, and the last time he saw the sun it looked like the sky was about to swallow the area into a den of hell.

ONI had resources. The ground decoy units were two man teams that simply hid in the brush, debris, trenches or sewers of the surrounding area. They were Marine Special Operations, the go anywhere do anything type. But Eric didn't like the idea of having this secret location of ONI brass guarded by a bunch of moles. Moles could vanish from sight, they could stay silent for hours, days and weeks if they needed to, but they weren't trained killers. They were sharp shooters, and experts in camouflage, but they were not heavy combat soldiers, and they were not up to date on the combat strategies of the Brutes. This new Covenant was a ferocious beast, nearly as deadly as the Elite led campaign.

Eric turned to his side and looked at Mathew and Gridolee. He had decided that the lead pelican would carry the majority of the heavy hitters, the warriors, while the second pelican would carry only the science team and Catherine Halsey. This way, if they were attacked, there was a higher percentage of the lead pelican being shot down first, and hopefully getting the second pelican enough time to bug out.

But Eric was never good with odds or percentages.

He quickly returned his gaze to the pilot, and listened in on the radio chatter.

"Confirming all Black." The pilot sharply stated as she flipped off the pelican's lights and beacons.

"Receiving guidance ping. Five till LZ." The copilot muttered.

"Geez, we're flying blind." The second pilot radioed.

Eric huffed into his radio. "Cut that chatter. Stick to Op."

"Roger." The second pilot nervously replied.

The radio suddenly buzzed from the decoy unit on the ground. "_Radar wake! Radar wake! You've been tagged!"_

Eric cursed under his breath.

"_Evade. Bank to port, drop to ... two hundred."_

"Copy!" The lead pilot shouted.

"Copy!" The second pilot shouted after a brief pause.

What was happening out there? Eric hadn't heard of a 'Radar Wake', and the idea didn't seem to make much sense. The pelican banked and everyone shifted to hold on. Eric turned to Gridolee and asked him, "Radar Wake?"

"The Forerunner ship that Truth controls, has a unique defense system. Similar to Covenant cruiser's plasma canons, but it does not rely on line of sight in order to fire. A radar signal is all it needs in order to track its target."

"Incoming!" The lead pilot screamed. Her voice seemed calm, yet excited. Pilots were an awkward bunch, as they loved to fly and seemed eager to do fancy maneuvers in order to dodge weapons fire; unusual tactics that usually shifted a Marine or Shock Troopers lunch. "I can't see it! Damn it!"

The co-pilot shot back, "How can anyone see anything out here?"

"_Stay your course, Foxtrot! Tangent, increase speed to match Foxtrot_" The decoy unit was feeding them information as fast as they could, but even that felt too slow. The pilots were on edge, flying blind, and trusting in a ground unit that was miles away and tracking them via GPS active Pings. Pilots were trained to trust their instruments and their eyes, not the moles. So it was expected that one of them lost their temper.

The lead pilot lost her calm. "You tell me to evade and then you tell me stay the course! Make up your mind!" Flying blind and trusting in someone you couldn't see would make anyone jumpy.

"_Trust me, we've done this before."_

"Trust you?" She shot back. "You're not up here, you dirty mole."

"_Reset to beacon, full speedâ€¦.shitâ€¦"_ there was an explosion on the line. _"Decoy six is under fire. Incoming friendly needs eyes! Six out!" _

The moles were on the run. They had done there job, using themselves as bait in order to let the pelican's get clear. Now they were on their own, and the Pelican's were blind until another decoy unit cut in.

"The LZ beacon is now two minutes out, Chief." The co-pilot sighed. "Orders?"

Eric walked toward the cockpit. "LZ, notify decoys to go radio silent until decoy six checks in. We'll land ourselves." Eric didn't like that idea, but that was all they could do. They wouldn't have the decoy unit radioing them information on Brute patrols.

The pilot sighed. She didn't like that idea anymore then having the moles feed her info.

The radio quickly switched off on the LZ's end. They had gotten the message and the inbound group was on their own.

"I'm locked on the beacon." The pilot marked.

Eric tapped his radio. "Tangent, ride our tail. Move when we move."

The second pilot replied back. "Yes sir."

Eric leaned toward the co-pilot and looked over the man's shoulder. He was attempting to see the ship wide radar. They'd only have a few seconds to veer clear of any inbound units.

But luckily it was a quiet two minutes.

"Beacon mark. Dusting off." The pilot shouted.

Eric patted her on the shoulder. She had done a good job. He turned to his team and held up a fist and pointed two fingers to the rear ramp. Mathew 08 hopped up and lowered the ramp. Gridolee and his grunt support unit trotted to the edge and looked outward in to the dark rain drenched surroundings.

Gridolee turned to the grunts. "Migpap, establish a perimeter. Put your noses to good use."

Migpap cheerfully jumped of the ramp, falling the short ten feet, and rolled away from the pelican's landing zone. "Fan out, by two, secure area." He softly ordered his team. They cloaked and vanished into the stormy night.

Eric was next, his Assault rifle primed and ready. "Tangent, hold at fifty until LZ check is set."

"Roger that." The second pelican's pilot replied. "Holding at Fifty."

Lightning lit the surrounding area, burning a ghost image of the region in Eric's eyes. Trees lined the south. Remains of Mombasa and the Covenant made canyon was to the north. Eric clicked on his Radio and set it to the proper frequency. "Friendly forces at the door."

Mathew stepped out of the pelican and turned toward the nose. Rain beads swelled all around. He knelt near a tree and switched to night vision. It helped. "Clear. Thirty yards."

Gridolee trotted a few feet out scanning the area and replied, "No hostiles detected."

Migpap emerged from emptiness, shaking water from his hooves, and replied. "Me no see nothing. Teams say area clear. No smell nothing either."

"How good is that nose in the rain?" Mathew shot back.

"Brute stink worse in water." Migpap laughed.

Eric was still restless. "Displace fifty yards, mark LZ drop 2. Tangent stay at the ready."

"Roger." Came in from all voices. Tangent shifted sideways and prepared to land while the advanced team made sure that the area was in fact secure.

After a few minutes of waiting everyone replied with the same statements and Eric breathed a little easier. Rain water was rolling off his gear, adding an extra chill to the African night. His suit adjusted to the temperature.

"Tangent. Down and off."

Eric watched as rain poured from the top of the bird as it lowered and finally came to a rest. The ramp opened and a horde of Marines filed out. "By twos. Secure a path to the entrance. Move out!" The Marines did as they were told, sprinting away from the LZ and toward the entrance into the ONI facility known as The Gateway.

Eric climbed the ramp, water dripping from his armor and nodded toward the four scientists. "Area is clear, but I don't want to risk it. Until we get to the door, I want everyone to keep at least ten feet between you and the person in front of you. Keep your heads down and move swiftly."

Catherine had to comment. "We are no longer spring chickens, Eric." Two of the men laughed at Doctor Halsey's comment, but the young lady with them could not find any humor in the situation. "Point us in the right direction, we'll do what we can." Catherine added.

Eric pointed toward a clearing of brush, barely visible with the downpour of rain. "There are two trees directly ahead of you. Split them and keep going straight. If you veer off course a marine will put you back on the path." Eric looked the group over. "Dr. Halsey,

you'll lead. She'll be last." Eric pointed to the younger woman sitting on the bench.

Catherine gave a shout, "Anne. You heard the Chief." Catherine watched as the young woman sluggishly pulled on her light jacket and pulled the hood over her head. Doctor Halsey leaned toward Eric. "Push her if you need to. She's been in shock all day. She's never seen death."

"I can tell. That's why she's going last." Eric turned to the group and made sure they were ready. "Gridolee, lead them out."

"As you wish, Honored one." Gridolee stood at the ramp's edge, his body armor drenched in rain water and he nodded toward Catherine. "I will go slowly. Follow me and do not stop."

Gridolee turned and trotted into the rain. Catherine huffed as she followed. His pace could not be classified as 'slow'; Catherine felt like she was running a sprint. She pulled her hood upon her head and watched the massive Elites back. Wet grass bobbed against her and it felt like rain was splashing up into her face. Her glasses began to fog and she pulled them off. She could still see Gridolee ahead of her, but she was worried about the other scientists behind her. She turned her head and could hear the slosh of mud and water at her heels.

A voice quickly forced her to turn forward, "Watch it, ma'am!" A marine jumped up and gently angled her into the right direction. She felt his hand graze her side, and edge her back on to the path. She refocused and spotted Gridolee. She had strayed off the beaten path by nearly thirty feet.

Gridolee stopped at what looked like a rock outcropping, but further examination showed it to actually be a heavily armored door. Weapon's turrets lined the area, two scorpion tanks and at least one warthog. Catherine was stunned because just a minute ago she was running through a dense packet of grass and leaves. Now she was on solid ground with ONI personal.

Gridolee halted and looked back to see if everyone was still following. Two, three, and four, all were accounted for. Eric was closer to the scientists than was planned, and he was holding the arm of the young woman that Doctor Halsey had singled out.

Eric let the woman go, and she simply lowered her head. The scientists were breathing heavily, and Catherine smiled as Eric walked past. "Sorry about the run, ma'am, but we are in enemy territory."

"Eric, the whole planet is Enemy territory." She exhaled. "Can we go inside? It is still wet out here."

Eric walked toward the door and was approached by three armed men. They were Navy officers, but they seemed out of place. ONI Section III security.

"Senior Chief, Sir!" One man saluted. "We have orders to bring you, the rest of the Black Ops, and Doctor Halsey's staff inside. The elite and grunts will have to stay out."

Eric interrupted. "Lieutenant Gridolee is hereby assigned to Doctor Halsey's full security detail. He does not leave her side."

"Sirâ€¦ that'sâ€¦ uhâ€¦" The man was at a loss for words; as was Gridolee. The elite looked at Catherine and she smiled innocently back at him.

The guard questioned, "Sir, this is an ONI facilityâ€¦ the Eliteâ€¦"

"The elite is a Lieutenant in his respected service. He has fought by my side a lot longer than anyone inside this base. I feel that he would be more trust worthy then any of you. And according to my higher ups, Doctor Catherine Halsey is a VIP amongst VIPs. So, either you open the door and let us in, or we turn around and go back to Eden."

Catherine had walked up to Eric's side. "Please decide quickly. This rain is starting to damper my mood."

"Sir, as you wish." The officer sighed. "Follow me." Eric led the way, with Catherine, Gridolee, the science staff, and Mathew pulling up the rear.

Eric radioed back. "Migpap, make yourselves at home."

Migpap and his group emerged from cloak, startling a few of the human security officers. The group of four grunts quickly jogged into the weapons shed and got out of the rain. Before long they were all sitting and fast asleep.

Eric added to the security guard, "Make plans to bring the Unggoy inside as well. They can remain on the upper levels, but I don't want them outside with those trigger happy Moles nearby."

"I'll see what I can do, Chief."

The group entered the building and descended down a short elevator. At the bottom they stepped out and were greeted by several more soldier and ONI officers. Catherine and the scientists were offered towels to dry off and fresh clothes. They eagerly accepted. Mathew and Eric never left Gridolee's side. Despite what he had told the officer, surely a higher ranking brass member would show up and have Gridolee escorted out of the building. Eric hoped against this, as he needed Gridolee.

Mathew was also privy to this notion. "Why did you want Gridolee in here?" He said on his private channel. "You know the brass won't go for this."

"I don't trust them." Eric replied. "I trust the elites more then I trust ONI right now, and that should tell you a lot."

Mathew was taken back by Eric's words. After all, the Elites killed Kim, Black Ops 04. "Ericâ€¦ what's going on in your head?" Mathew questioned.

Eric didn't respond, but looked at Mathew and tapped his helmet near the ear. Chances were that someone might be listening on the secure channel. Inside an ONI facility, there were no closed channels.

Mathew understood and changed topics. "Still, if you don't trust them, we need them."

"I know." Eric sighed. He didn't dare say what he wanted to say, but understood what he needed to do.

Catherine and the scientists emerged from the rooms wearing clean clothes. Anne slowly sulked out of the room last. She was lost amongst her thoughts and felt out of place. Catherine stood in front of her and glared into her eyes.

"Yes ma'am?" Anne questioned.

Catherine remained silent, sighed heavily, turned and walked away. She approached the security escort and said, "Leave her somewhere, I don't care where. She's useless to me like this."

Everyone looked at Anne, and she froze in place; shocked.

"If you will all follow me, we need to go to level 15." The security officer waved the group forward to the next set of elevators further down the hall. Anne stood motionless. The security guard nodded toward one of the floor monitors opposite the group and they walked up to Anne.

"Follow me, Miss."

Anne nodded and silently followed, and eventually vanished amongst the upper level corridors.

The other scientists, Gridolee and the Black Ops descended lower into the facility arriving at the fifteenth floor. Armed guards patrolled the hallway and every one of them eyed Gridolee strongly. Eric and Mathew stood in front of their Sangheili partner, forming a small distraction from everyone's harsh glares.

Catherine commented. "Most of these Section III boys may not have seen an elite since the alliance was formed." She looked to Gridolee and showed the same smile she always formed when looking at him. "We should be careful in this neck of the woods."

"I have no fear of them. If they wish to test their courage, I would gladly face them." Gridolee softly spoke.

Eric whispered, "It won't come to that. I hope."

As they neared a thick double door, several of the security officers approached and demanded that everyone be stripped of their side arms. "Sir, we must also ask that you two take off your helmets."

Eric and Mathew hadn't even realized they were still wearing them. They were so accustomed to having their modified ODST helmets on that they completely ignored it. Mathew and Eric popped the seals to their helmets and pulled them off. They both had thick beards from too many days without shaving, their hair was puffy with sweat from prior combat situations and they had a slight musky smell of two active men.

Catherine was forced to take a step back while holding her nose; hardly able to contain her laughter.

Mathew scorned her, "You try wearing this gear, even with the coolant layer, for several days." He laughed.

Catherine smiled and shook her head.

The door parted and everyone walked in. The security guard halted Gridolee. "Your helmet and energy swordsâ€¦ Lieutenant."

Eric looked to Gridolee and nodded, a simple suggestion that it was alright. Eric was also surprised to hear the guard call him a Lieutenant. That was proof enough that someone was watching, and listening to everything that they had been saying earlier. Gridolee disarmed and followed them in.

The brass sat quietly before them, with Wesley standing in the corner at full attention. Mathew and Eric ignored him.

Catherine did not. "Are they feeding you well, Mr. Williams?"

Wesley didn't reply. The brass motioned for everyone to have a seat on the couch adjacent from the table and Gridolee stood against the wall near them. But Commander Hue quickly blurted, "Hello Lieutenant Raynord. Would you and Doctor Halsey please remain standing?"

Mathew and Catherine were curious as to why she called Eric a Lieutenant. Eric was stripped of his bars after the New Mombasa incident.

Eric stood tall, placed his hands behind his back and looked at the table of high ranking officials; the ONI Board of Representatives. It was combination of officers from the various branches of the UNSC. However, unlike the public office of Naval Intelligence, this board was a completely different beast. This was Section III, best known as the Board of Black Operations.

Commander Hue stood from her seat at the table, pulled down her uniform with a soft tug and spoke with a casual smile. "Lieutenant Eric Raynord, under command of Captain Megan Monroe of the Rogue fantasy, we would like to thank you for your service to the UNSC, and to ONI Section III. Your plan to find the Elite home world was executed successfullyâ€¦"

Eric turned his eyes toward Gridolee, knowing that the next few lines would perhaps anger the massive elite.

Hue continued, "â€¦ however, the alliance hindered your plans to destroy it. Thankfully you, along with Commander Miranda Keys and Sergeant Major Avery Johnson, were able to establish a peaceful aid to this alliance." Commander Hue stepped out from the table to approach Eric and Halsey.

Catherine Halsey took advantage of this brief silence. "Lieutenant?" She questioned softly.

"It's a long story, ma'am." Eric whispered.

Hue overheard, "Indeed it is quite a tale. After the death of Senior Chief Petty Officer Kimberly Peters, we were approached by Eric and gave him a quick commission based on his deeds during the Troy

operation. The Black Ops lost a great deal of their forces on Troy."

An older woman at the table cut in. "We all agreed on his plan. Though it was fully based on revenge, we agreed that this would be a swift strike against the Covenant. The duty of the Black Ops was to observe the Covenant reaction after they had pushed us away from a planet. We knew they stayed and studied and searched, but we didn't know what they were looking for."

Hue added. "Vice Admiral Parangosky is correct." Doctor Halsey twitched at the name. Parangosky was the head of ONI, and rightfully she would be involved with Section III. Hue continued. "The Lieutenant knew that they were looking for crystals. The same type of crystal that was eventually found on Earth, and it somehow powered the Ark. We had found another artifact in space, picked up by the Apocalypso, and it was too late when we discovered it was a beacon to the Covenant."

Eric couldn't hold his tongue any longer. "After the beacon broadcasted, I knew the Covenant would come. I had already broken up the surviving members of the Black Ops, but I knew that I needed them in order to find a Covenant home world. My plan was risky and complex, but it was the only way. We choose a remote Facility where the the Ark Crystal could be hidden. Some place easily defend able and protected from the Covenant's scans. Unfortunately, Doctor Roselyn Santos was an unknown factor."

"Indeed she was!" Parangosky snapped. She was obviously a bit angry. "Nearly cost us the whole operation."

Eric continued. "The plan was originally to force the Covenant into searching the city by foot. I would organize any militia I could and board the ship. Spartans were on standby and waiting for the call to join the fight, however, things changed when the Covenant zeroed in on the crystal without hesitation. I defended it as best I could."

Mathew blurted, "This was all a part of your plan?"

Eric ignored his long time friend, and continued, "No thanks to Major Rawlings small part, the plan was nearly grounded."

Commander Hue chuckled, "I think she charged you withâ€| treason, wasn't it?"

"Yes ma'am."

The board members gave a soft chuckle, obviously they knew something Eric didn't. Another man spoke up. "Had I not been there, there is no telling what she would have done." The man was a Lieutenant Commander and his pipe sat comfortably at his lips, but it was not lit. Eric recognized the man as the one that had allowed Rose, Wesley and himself to walk out of that room with 'Uncharacterized Demotions'.

"Yet it was only a farce." Hue added.

For Mathew's sake, Eric blurted out, "Yes. I received a memo a few hours later saying that my commission was still in place, but for

security reasons I was to play along with the demotion."

Mathew could be heard sighing from across the room, and he also shook his head in disbelief.

Hue once again addressed them. "The plan was off track, but we still had hopes that you could pull it off. We selectively gave you command of Red Squad, comprised mostly of soldier from your Black Ops, and finally a Spartan was sent to assist."

"I thought he was going to lead the mission, but he affirmed that I was still in control. 043 was a good soldier."

Hue added. "You carried out the mission as expected with your Black Ops team. Siren successfully infiltrated the ship's systems, found Dorenth and took you there. The rest is history. But I think it is only appropriate that we continue to address you as your proper title, Lieutenant."

Eric nodded. "How does the Major feel about that, ma'am? She is strongly opinionated."

There was a short silence and everyone looked to a thin Navy officer wearing nothing but a naked officer's uniform; there was no identification upon him, not even his name or rank.

"She was withholding evidence from the board. Including information about the Black Ops program that was not made known to the Board." The man stated. Eric could recognize an ONI spook from a mile away. He handed Eric a data pad and said, "you may find that an interesting read."

Hue chimed in, "But before you read that. We must inform you that Major Rawlings is dead. KIA. She was leaving the facility when her ship was shot down by a Seraph patrol."

Eric didn't believe that story, but decided to ignore it for now. He then looked at the data pad and began to cringe. "There's moreâ€¦" He froze and read deeper into the file. Names, ranks, date of births, skill set, eating habits, performance evaluations and nutrient mixes were displayed for one hundred EaMP candidates. Eric lifted his head and glared at the ONI spook that had given him the file.

The man smiled softly. "Major Rawlings gave us this information before she departed. She was heading back to Eden. We are currently looking for Colonel Ackerson in order to verify that these men and women existed."

Eric turned toward Mathew and tossed the data pad toward his friend. Mathew caught it and read it to himself. He was just as stunned. Eric turned back to the brass. "Why weren't we told? We could have used the extra man power."

"Unlike you and your Black Ops, these soldiers have been under Ackerson's private care. According to Rawlings they were stationed under the command of Lieutenant Commander Kurt Ambrose, on ONYX. They were used to aid in the training of the Spartan IIIs on base. Those soldiers have been declared legally dead for more than fifteen years. Their deaths were cover ups, and Commander Ambrose never questioned who they were. However, our own intelligence has reported that Planet

Onyx has goneâ€| missing."

"Missing?" Eric questioned. "A Planet has gone, missing?"

"Yes. We received word from Blue Team, Spartan's 043, 058, and 104, just prior to the planet's disappearing act. A small team is being put together to investigate. We're hoping that Spartan 087 and Doctor Halsey will lead this team."

Everyone turned to Catherine. She sat stunned. "What about the Ark Data Node?"

"Come now doctor, surely you've watched the rest of the data on the Path of Reclamation?" Parangosky added. "We've been aware of it for some time. Why do you think we've been soâ€| aggressive in our actions as of late?"

Halsey flinched, reached into her pocket and pulled up the data pad. She glared at it. Did they know something that she didn't? Was ONI this confident? She walked to the table and placed the data pad into a receptacle. The video display emerged on the wall behind her and began with the opening statement on the goals for Reclaimers.

Catherine stated. "I have to warn, that two of my staff members committed suicide after seeing this."

Hue added. "We know." Halsey folded her arms inward, upset that section III was this informed, too informed, but at the same time she wondered how informed they really were.

The video continued and neared the section where she ended it. The video showed the sequence of lines of soldiers, both human and elite being injected with the soldier gene, which was derived from the Flood spores. And then it shifted into a new sequence. A war had begun, but the enemy was not made clear. The construction of the Halo's was shown, several species aided in its construction. Then there was a switch, more species were being given some form of injection.

Catherine leaned forward. "More tests?"

"Not quite." A voice said from the table. "We thought this as well, but look closer."

Halsey watched. Grunts, Jackals, Engineers, and various other creatures she had never seen, all being injected, or so she thought. "Noâ€| they aren't being injected. Samples... blood samples."

Some one spoke. "We don't know much, but at some point the Forerunners began testing to find a way to reach immortality."

Catherine added as she glared at the display. "Yes, I was under this suspicion as well. That was my original belief in why the Forerunners accidentally created the Flood."

The video continued. Numerous images flowed across the screen, cell reconstruction and then an image of what looked to be another Halo world, but it wasn't. "What was that?" She questioned. It appeared to

be a giant structure almost arc shaped. Similar to Halo in every way, however it was not a ring. Then another image display, an image of a sub-space world. The planetoid was metallic in appearance, yet images showed the inside as habitable. A glowing orb sat in the center globe shaped world, and it was much bigger than those used in the inner sanctum and the Seed ship.

"A giant globe," Catherine mumbled. She pondered, "No, a Dyson's sphere?" She peered closely, but the images shifted. Another image showed, star charts, locations, points of referencesâ€¦ a map.

Catherine turned to Parangosky, "Vice Admiral, do youâ€¦"

"Yes, we do and we have, several times." She said with a heavy sigh. "There's nothing there."

"I think your timing is off." Catherine said. "The Path of Reclamation. The puzzle is on that world. The answer is thereâ€¦ whatever that Forerunner object is will be revealed soon." Catherine looked to the Board as she stopped the video. "The Ark is counting down."

Everyone gasped. "Based on what?" Hue questioned.

"Siren was running an analysis and discovered that her system clock is not concurrent with the stars. Time, at some point, stopped on Earth. We lost six days."

"That's not possible."

"No, it's not possible. But it is a fact. Every time keeping device on Earth is out of synch and is six days behind. By my estimate today is November 17, not the 11th. There is no real way to tell when this accord, but Earth lost six days. During those Six days, the stars continued to move. I think this was not a solar event. It was a planetary event. Everything on Earthâ€¦ simply stopped."

"What would that have to do with the Ark?" Someone asked.

"The storm overhead began three days ago, did it not?"

"Yes." Everyone agreed.

"It is directly connected to the Ark, a local event. The storm, according to reports, began on the day Siren reported the time shift. We lost six days and then the Ark powered on. This is what my scientists also discovered. And based on this display we just watchedâ€¦" Catherine replayed a segment of the video, a description of a ship and a massive underground device showed on the screen. "â€¦you can see that this is the Ark. The first object is the Ship, while the second object that stretches into the ground is the Ark structure. The system has a failsafe countdown. Siren discovered this when she accessed the Data Node, however we didn't understand what triggered it. Now we know. I was scanning for Flood spores in the air and based on wind-shear I estimated that we were fine. There were no traces. But my two scientists still believed that we were going to be infected. After seeing this, I understand why they still killed themselves. If the Ark has activated, that means that some flood spores still survived. This is what they feared. But they didn't

understand the full nature of a Flood spore. It is a very weak infection, and one spore cannot turn you. At worst it will make you very ill. This is why the flood evolved with the Infection form."

Catherine started the last of the video, and as she predicted the image bounced back to the Ark Structure, a single flood spore, and then a storm as the Ark began to draw in particles from the atmosphere. It was a simulation, but there was no doubt that it could be the real thing. The Ark's failsafe didn't care about situations. If it found one flood spore, it would activate.

Parangosky added. "We've seen this. We know what it means. The Ark will fire if a Flood Spore is detected, but it can be shut down."

"You fail to see the point, Vice Admiral." Catherine watched the display as it once again shifted to the Dyson's sphere and then the strangely shaped halo. "If the storm began three days ago, and the time slip occurred three days ago, and we lost six days, then I can only guess that we have three days until the Ark fires. But like I said, this is only a guess. The Ark is now charging itself."

The display continued and Catherine smiled at the following images of human's and elites standing side by side. She mumbled, "The Path of Reclamation. The Forerunners want us to rebuild the Empire. The elites-how is it possible that we are once again fighting together? No. How is it possible that things are being played out exactly the way the Forerunners envisioned it?"

The group began to mumble to themselves. "What do you believe was the reason of this time event, Doctor? What caused it?"

Catherine looked to the images and lowered her head, "I believe it was Cortana."

There was a silent pause as everyone glared at Catherine coldly. Parangosky was the first to comment. "Has she begun her Rampancy period?"

Catherine watched as the video began to repeat, she then turned to the table and smiled. "Cortana has done more than any AI in the fleet. Her service record and accomplishments areâ€¦"

Hue returned to her seat and cut into Catherine's speech. "Stop doting over your estranged daughter, Doctor Halsey. We are all aware of Cortana's service record. The fact that she did not physically return with the Arbiter still has several of us rather miffed."

Catherine froze. "What do you mean?"

"You were not informed?" Hue questioned oddly as she looked to her superiors. Parangosky nodded her head, agreeing to let her tell Halsey. "The Cortana that the Arbiter and Sergeant Johnson recoveredâ€¦ was only a copy. Siren made this clear in her last report."

Catherine blurted out, "I thought she was with the Master Chiefâ€¦"

"During the destruction of the Rogue Fantasy, Lord Hood ordered a rescue mission for the AIs." Parangosky stated as she thumbed through her data pad. "It was lead by an elite Lieutenantâ€¦ Simyaldee."

Gridolee lifted his brow at the name, he remembered that particular mission.

Parangosky continued, "Simyaldee returned the Rogue Fantasy's data module to Eden. Major Rawlings, along with others, quickly powered up the module and found that Siren was forced toâ€¦" She adjusted and read the file directed, "delete what was actually a degrading copy of AI Cortana."

Doctor Halsey looked stunned. "Siren never told me this." She looked to Eric, but Eric simply shook his head, unknowing of any of the details. "I worked with Siren for several daysâ€¦ she never mentioned this. That meansâ€¦"

"Don't alarm yourself, Doctor." Parangosky cut in. "We will solve one crisis at a time. Cortana is a mandatory asset. Leaving her in the hands of the Flood is not advisable. Once we're done with Truth we will be going after Cortana."

Hue added, "It is not considered a rescue operation, Doctor. We must be sure that Cortana is secured or deleted. You yourself said that she may be the reason why we lost six days-though how this is possible is beyond me. None the lessâ€¦ it is clear that Cortana must be found and then secured or deleted."

Catherine stood in silence.

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Eric descended down the elevator with Mathew close at his side. The meeting was over and had been for quite some time. Catherine's ship was scheduled to depart in less than three hours, but she took that time to talk with Rose in the Mechanics and testing bay on the lower level. For Gridolee's own safety, Eric sent him to the upper levels with the Grunts, to prepare them for the upcoming mission. Eric had planned to go into combat on his own, but Section III decided to officially give him the mission.

Eric exited the elevator and could smell the heavy garage sent of oily parts. Ahead of them was a bay window with one Spartan III looking into the cave beyond. Weapons fire sounded inside the cave while Rose and Catherine examined a nearby table of parts.

Rose was gritty looking. Her face was smeared with sweat and grease and her hair was tied up and back. She had come a long way from her all business attire. Even though she had a PHD in Engineering, she rarely had a chance to work hands on, if only to show a worker the correct way to assemble a Mark VI gauntlet. Eric felt reassured seeing her in dirty clothes, it somehow fit her better than the marine fatigues that she was forced to wear a few weeks ago.

Eric and Mathew walked across the metal bay and Eric turned to Mathew, "Check out the SIIIs. See if they are worth it." Mathew gave a nod and walked towards the practice range and the lone Spartan III.

Eric turned towards Rose and Doctor Halsey.

Catherine was talking about the gel layer of the Mark VI as Eric approached. "â€| amazing. The gene node is off by one, but that should be easy to compensate. I assume you reverse engineered the Reclaimer armor to get this far."

Rose smiled. "Yes. It was the only way. I have no way of understanding how it works, but it is working and that's all that matters for now. Eventually I'll have time to adjust the flow ratio, and maybe study how this works. But for now this will have to do."

"It's brilliant. The power output should be more than one hundred and twenty percent higher than spec. It is too bad John isn't aroundâ€| he could use this as well."

Rose smiled, happy to see that someone was appreciating her work. "For now, Kelly will have to do. But are you really going? To space, I mean."

"If John is successful, we have no choice. This is the only way to make it end. That Dyson's Sphere and Onyx, I need to be there. I'm leaving the Path of Reclamation in the hands of Section III."

Eric walked up to the table and examined what the commotion was about. Rose fell silent as he leaned over her shoulder and examined her work.

Catherine sighed, "Well I guess my work here is done. Rose, do what I told you and this suit will be ready. I'll go and tell Kelly to get ready to leave." Catherine stood from the table and walked to the observation glass.

Eric was emotionless and glared at Rose. "You okay?"

"Fine." She blurted out.

"I know we haven't had a chance to talkâ€|"

"I'm sorry I helped Rawlings take Kelly." Rose shot back. "How I left you in the desert, it's been bothering me, but I had to. Rawlings was right. I'm the only one that could do this. Look what I made! It can up the power output to the Mark VI armor and help reduce power consumption." Rose lowered her head, after noticing that Eric didn't care. "This is all I can do, Eric. I told you I would help build a weapon to help fight the Covenant. This was all I could doâ€| butâ€| I did do something else."

Rose grabbed Eric's hand and led him back to a storage closet. She pushed him inside and gleefully smiled. On the bench were three SPI armor suits. "SPI armor doesn't work on the same principles of the Mark V or VI. It is best comparable to your modified ODST armor, but with some MJOLNIR qualities. I adjusted them. These three suits will work with your augmented muscles. But I had to lower the output because you don't have the bone structure strong enough to support the full power. I mean, you are Spartans, but not quite Spartan IIIs. I made them for you, Mathew and Melanie."

Eric examined the suits and a crooked smile formed. "She would have

loved this. Melanie. Mel would have loved this."

"Oh God." Rose gasped.

"She died two days ago." Eric turned to Rose. She was at a loss of words and holding her hands to her mouth in shock. Eric sat down on the bench and lowered his head. "I'm tired, Rose. Everyoneâ€| they're all gone. Mathew is the only one I have left."

She didn't say anything. She walked toward him and stood in front of him. She then embraced his head into her chest and held him. Eric wrapped his arms around her legs and for a moment he let down his soldier's emotional wall and cried. He held himself in control, no loud sobbing, no hysterical burst or whimpers, he simply let go of his anger and frustration and let them run down his face in the form of tears and small sniffles.

Rose gently stroked his head with one hand and cupped the back of his neck with the other. She understood what he meant. He wasn't sleepy, he wasn't exhausted, he was emotionally drained. Death surrounded him everywhere he went. The world was coming to an end, and amongst the hundreds of thousands of soldiers that were left to fight this war, Eric was considered one of the more aspiring leaders.

Rose knelt down to face Eric. She held his head up by placing her forehead under his. Her nose brushed his nose. She used her thumbs and dried his eyes. She looked into his swollen eyes, feeling the edge of her eyelashes brushing against Eric's. She twisted her head slightly, Eric countered, and they kissed.

Eric brushed his hands over her head, cupping the back of her neck, and pulled her closer. Unlike the quick kiss they had shared in the past, this was real. Rose could no longer hold back her desires. She pulled away and looked into Eric's eyes. His eyes studied her and she knew he was thinking the same thing she was. This could possibly be there last moment together.

Rose stood and closed the closet door.

Mathew turned from the training Spartans and watched as the door that Eric and Rose went into closed. He turned back towards the window as Kelly sprinted around the training room. Standing at Mathew's side was one of the Spartan IIIs and Doctor Halsey. Mathew questioned the Spartan, saying, "Are you taking a breather?"

A soft voice exited the Spartan's helmet. "No, sir. I lost my temper a moment ago. The Chief ordered me off the training ground until further notice."

"Mind if I ask what happened?" Mathew turned to the young girl.

"If you order me to, Sir." She calmly replied. She continued to watch the training inside.

Mathew huffed, instantly recognizing that she was not going to be an easy soldier to work with. "Spill it. What happened in there?"

"Sir!" She snapped too, and faced Mathew at full attention. "During the Capture the Flag scenario, I utilized my team as a diversion

however the Chief was prepared for this. She defended the flag and herself by " "

"-waiting for you to come to her." Mathew cut in. "She found a good hiding spot, and took you out before you could make your move, then took out the decoys."

" Y-yes Sir." Kate curiously stated. "How did you know, Sir?"

Mathew smiled at the young girl. "Combat experience. Something you lack." Mathew walked closer. "Helmet off." Kate, quickly popped the seal of her SPI armor, cupped it under her right arm, and stood at attention. "At ease, uh?"

"Kate. Spartan G017, Petty Officer Second Class, Sir!" She formally stated.

Mathew looked into her eyes. She was young, no more than twenty years old at best guess. "So, why did she put you out?"

"Sir, when we did not win, I scorned my team. I told them I would challenge the Chief on my own. I told them to sit and watch me. I felt no, I FEEL that I can win!"

Mathew rubbed his chin. "Kate, do you have an attitude problem?"

"I was frustrated and lost my calm in battle, Sir. I was angry."

"Calm in battle?" Mathew smirked. Halsey was listening, but mostly watching Kelly. "When you get in a real battle, you'll find that there is no such thing as being calm. You adapt to battle. If I meet anyone who's calm in a heated exchange of weapons fire, I'll get as far away from him as I can, because he is either drunk or suicidal."

Mathew turned and looked out the window towards Kelly and the other two Spartan IIIs. "What have you learned from the Chief during all of this?"

"That Spartan IIs are still far better than we are." She mumbled. "Sir."

Mathew sighed and looked away from the girl. "You're too caught up with trying to prove yourself, aren't you? This isn't a game, kid. You either learn from those who are better than you, or you end up in a box. Stop trying to win, and learn HOW to win."

"I don't understand, Sir." Kate added. "I thought the goal was to always win?"

Catherine laughed. "Where have I heard that before?" She turned to Mathew and young Kate. "She hasn't seen combat yet, Mathew. You can't talk to her like you would a marine." Catherine walked to Kate, smiled and placed her arms up to her shoulder. Kate stood nearly six foot five. "He means here, in training. Your job is to learn. But in real combat, you will have to win. You like to win don't you?"

"Yes ma'am. I always win." Kate looked out the window at Kelly. "At least I did until these last two days."

Mathew folded his arms. "You've met a better opponent, and not even superior numbers will help you. How do you handle that situation?"

Kate thought for a moment. "Tactically you would fight the opponent even if means death. You would hope that someone would eventually be able to stop your opponent even if you fail."

"That's a pretty basic cannon fodder tactic." Mathew shook his head in doubt. "We can't use them, Doctor. They hurl themselves into a fight, head first, without thinking and attempting to use brute strength all the time."

"You have little choice, Mathew. I'm sure your Lieutenant told you to check them out. You will have to make them ready."

Mathew watched as Kate looked at him with a puzzled demeanor. "Suit up. Come with me. If you're going to be a Black Ops, you have to think like one." Mathew pulled on his helmet, gripped a practice rifle and opened the door to the training ground.

Kate nervously followed.

The computer AI gave a soft buzz when the door opened. "Halt exercise."

Kelly and the Spartan III's stopped their game. Mathew and Kate approached them, stepping through the hilly passes and jumping over trenches to the nearby sandy hill, and atop the mound stood Kelly.

"19, is that you?" Kelly questioned loudly.

"No, its Mathew 08." He sighed. Whenever the Black Ops showed up, 19 was often the first name shouted.

"Sorry. What is she doing in here? Is she ready to cooperate with her teammates?"

"She will be." Mathew shot back. "Mind if we take you on?"

"Sure thing." Kelly turned to the other two Spartans. "009 and 021, take a few minutes to get your energy back." The Spartans jogged off of the training area. "The game is Crazy King of the Hill."

"I haven't done this one since boot." Mathew chuckled as he pulled the hammer on his pulse rifle. The stun rounds buzzed as it primed in the chamber. Mathew looked at the rifle curiously and then lowered it. He looked up at Kelly. "How many hills?"

"Three." Kelly nodded, climbed from the hill and jogged to the far side of the training cave. She then opened a closed channel to Mathew. "What brings you in here with her?"

"Teaching her a lesson." Mathew radioed back. "Play hard, 087. We're coming for you."

The computer began the countdown at ten seconds.

Mathew killed the line to Kelly and opened another line to Kate. "The odds are against us so how should we handle this?"

"King of the Hill, we rush the mound and keep the Chief off of it."

"No. We can't keep her out of the hill. She'll easily overpower us." Mathew shot back. The alarm rang and they both took off toward the first selected hill. The location arrow appeared on their HUDs and they sprinted forward.

"Then, what can we do?" Kate asked as she jumped over a concrete barricade.

"She won't take the hill right off, so she'll watch and see how we attack. Unless she thinks we aren't a threat. With me out here she will most likely stay back and watch." Mathew knelt at the edge of the mound and looked around. Kelly was nowhere to be seen and his radar was being jammed. "She dropped a jammer somewhere."

"She's trying to flank us!" Kate gasped.

"Not too hasty, kiddo. There are a hundred scenarios for using a jammer. Flanking is too simple for a Spartan of her degree." Mathew popped his head up, found the hill circle and tossed a smoke bomb inside. Smoke spat from the grenade and engulfed the circle.

"Why did you do that? We could have used it later, and now she knows where we are."

"Kid, we've been sitting in the same spot for ten seconds. She already knows where we are. Get into the circle, lay prone and don't move till the smoke clears."

Kate climbed the mound and was instantly being targeted by pulse fire. She turned to face the fire and let her new shield unit take most of the fire. Kate then dived into the circle and vanished in the thick grey cloud of smoke. She couldn't see anything, and her radar was still being jammed. She lay on her stomach, swiveling her gun toward the area where the incoming fire had originated. The clock on her HUD began to climb, they had gained a twenty second lead before the circle vanished.

"The circle shifted to a new location, I'm going there!" Kate shouted into the com.

"Negative! Don't move!" Mathew shot back. "Stay on the ground, and play dead."

Kate held her frustration and held her position. Suddenly the clock on her helmet began to climb again. Mathew was scoring on the other hill. Pulse fire echoed in the cave then the counter on her HUD stopped.

A static burst filled Kate's Ears. "Fall in on my position, ASAP!"

Kate popped up and sprinted toward Mathew's NAV marker. She then

dived at his side. "I thought she got you."

"Nope, but she's about as smart as I expected her to be." Mathew was breathing hard, but he was excited. He was testing his wits and skills against a Spartan; a real Spartan. He had fought with the Spartan in the last few months, but never against them. It was exhilarating as he thought it would be. It was too bad Eric had to miss it. "She's scoring points, but that hill will shift, when it does, sprint to the top and make sure you are in the openâ€¦ in plain sight."

"I'm the bait?"

"You bet your ass you are."

The hill moved and Kate and Mathew sprinted toward it. Mathew gave a shout. "Be ready to defend yourself, and fall back if you have to."

Kate climbed the hill and stood in the center. Her head was on a constant swivel, and her heart was racing with a nervous flutter. "Where is she?"

Mathew took up position on the back side of the hill and counted. He had seen Kelly's land speed before, and with all the obstacles on the training ground he quickly estimated that Kelly would need eight seconds to reach this hill. The question was if she was going to take the bait. He risked it. He rolled to the clearing and sprinted in the direction Kelly was coming. Once he turned the corner a giant MJOLNIR clad Spartan emerged in his face. They both fired and dodged to their respected rights.

She fell for it.

Or maybe not.

Mathew rolled to his feet and watched as a stun grenade landed in front of him. She had to have thrown it before Mathew showed himself. Mathew didn't bother to stand, he simply kept rolling and luckily rolled clear as the stun grenade detonated. He jumped up and spun around as Kelly raced up the hill. Kate fired down, but Kelly was too elusive, or Kate was a really bad shot, either way Kate was forced to retreat. She watched as her counter stopped and Kelly's began. Kelly was still trailing by nearly forty seconds, but there was little time left on the existing Hill.

Mathew shouted into her COM. "She's in a pinch. She needs to score in order to win. She'll switch to a more aggressive style at the next Hill. Get to the center point of the three hills."

"The center point?" Kate questioned.

"You've got to be kidding me kid?" Mathew sighed over the radio. "The hills are set to three, it is a basic triangle formation. The first thing you should have done was to remember each hill spawn point!"

"Sorry Sir, Iâ€¦"

"Obvious errors get people killed in combat, Kate!" Mathew barked.

"Fall on my position, now!"

Kate sprinted toward Mathew and slid to his side. Mathew ignored her, and his head was bouncing from side to side. "The hill will spawn in 30 seconds!" The hill emerged forty yards away and Kate dashed toward it. Mathew didn't follow. He instead charged Kelly.

"Sir?" Kate questioned.

"We need forty seconds to win! I'll be the bait this time!"

Kate dived into the hill's score zone and watched as the seconds began to clip by. She then watched the spectacle in the middle of the training ground.

Mathew fired in a strafing pattern as Kelly attempted to blow past him. She stopped and jumped backwards as a stun grenade detonated. Mathew then fired from cover as Kelly also returned fire, and then he heard it. It was faint, but it was as clear as day; the sound of an empty stun clip. He remembered it from earlier, from when he was testing the gun when he first walked onto the training ground. Mathew spun from cover and charged toward Kelly. She was in the middle of slapping in another charge of stun batteries as Mathew raised his rifle and fired. Kelly let the first round wash over her shield and she slipped into cover. Mathew ceased fire and heard the loud confirmation of a freshly loaded round. Kelly was rearmed. He dropped a stun grenade and pivoted toward the hill and Kate. Kelly was quickly on his heels.

The stun grenade detonated and dropped Kelly's shields to twenty percent. She kept running after him. Her gun fired controlled bursts, but Mathew stayed low and didn't make himself an easy target.

He then stopped, turned, took a knee and returned fire. Kelly seemed shocked. She expected him to take cover. The first three rounds dropped her shield completely and she took cover behind a dismantled warthog. She checked her radar and saw that Mathew was charging her.

She stood and fired over the warthog, but Mathew's outstretched leg kicked the gun from her hands and he plowed into the goliath female Spartan. She stumbled backwards, but barely. Mathew, however, hit the ground hard. He stood and threw himself into Kelly's midriff. She easily tossed him to the side, but Mathew grabbed her arm and held on. His grip was tight, vice like, and a simple toss wasn't going to shake him loose.

Kelly had almost forgotten that the Black Ops strength was equal to her own. The only difference was that they didn't have the strength enhancements of a MJOLNIR Mark VI and the steel like bone structure of Spartan II and III surgeries. Kelly soon found herself being pushed backwards. Mathew had pulled himself back into her stomach, planted his shoulder and was driving her backwards.

A one ton Spartan was being physically bullied.

Kelly planted her back foot, stopping Mathew in his tracks. She wrapped her arms around his waist and flipped him over her head. He tumbled in the air, attempted to right himself but landed on his back just as the alarm sounded.

"Game over. Winner, Blue Team." The computer casually stated.

Mathew cheered as he lay on his back, throwing his arms into the air as if he had won some sort of tournament. Kate raced down the hill to see if he was okay and Kelly simply stood there, stunned.

"That was reckless." Kelly snapped. "I could have seriously hurt you."

Mathew stood, dusted himself off and extended his hand. "But you didn't." Kelly took his hand and gave it a shake.

Kate stopped at their side, "We won." She was shocked. "I didn't do anything, but we won."

Kelly turned to Kate and corrected her. "You had the hardest part, and I'm certain of it."

Mathew nodded, agreeing with Kelly. "You had to obey orders, Kate. You obeyed orders and you watched." Kate thought for a moment. She felt more like running fool than anything else. Mathew continued. "There were moments where you could have disobeyed but you didn't. You did what you were told no matter how much trouble it looked like I was in. That was risk you have to take, a risk everyone has to take when in combat."

Kelly added. "08 was giving you good commands. What did you learn from them?"

"Study your terrain and your opponent." Kate replied quickly.

"There's hope for you after all." Mathew sighed. "There is more, but we can talk about it later. For now, I think I need to debrief you and the other Spartan IIIs on your next assignment."

"A mission, Sir?" Kate eagerly questioned.

"Yeah, a mission." Mathew turned and walked away.

After walking back to the mechanics bay, Mathew took off his helmet and looked to the young Spartan IIIs. "Today, you and a Platoon of marines will be going into the Ark. Our orders will be simple; Find Truth or any other Prophet Hierarchs and kill them. You will be under the direct command of Lieutenant Eric Raynord. You will address him as 19 or Lieutenant, and if you're feeling cocky you can try 'El Tee'."

Mathew looked at the three of them, casting his eyes from one to the other. "Following orders is a must. If he orders you to jump into the flames of hell, you will strap a canister of fuel to your back and jump in with a smile. If he tells you to retreat, you will do so without question! In this Platoon, we have no place for those who second guess an order. 19 has been by my side for more than fifteen years and I'm sure that we will finish this war together, dead or alive.

Mathew turned toward Kelly and gave her a nod. "I need to go prep the platoon, but the Lieutenant will be out in a minute to debrief you.

I'm sure that the good Doctor will also share the plan." Mathew looked back at Kate, Greg, and Dave. "Get your gear together, and stay loose. Relax and clear your minds until I assemble the full Platoon. 19 might stop by and talk to you before then, so don't tell him that we had that little training session." Mathew turned and walked back to the elevator. But the closet door opened and Rose stepped out. She waved Mathew towards her and let him walk in.

Kelly rubbed her helmet in a somewhat confused manor. "Wait, 19 is a Lieutenant?"

Doctor Halsey sighed, "Apparently, he was always a Lieutenant but Section III told him to play along with the demotion."

Kelly turned to the three Spartan IIIs. "You're all pretty lucky. If your going into combat, it is always good to know that your Platoon commander is willing to get his hands bloody at your side. 19 is a great soldier, he'll keep you in line and on point."

Kate stepped forward. "Sir, permission to speak freely?"

"Granted."

"The Black Ops are Spartans?"

Halsey commented instead. "They volunteered for a program called the EaMP program. It was a cover for Spartan III testing." Halsey looked over her shoulder at the three Spartans. "They cut the Black Ops up, tested them and left them for deadâ€¦ so that you could be who you are today. Try to remember that when 19 and 08 start giving you orders."

Kate lowered her head. "But they survived."

Halsey added. "Yes, thanks to the kindness of their Chief of Surgery."

Kelly chimed in. "None of that really matters. You simply need to know that they are your superiors, and they have far more combat experience than you do. 017, you should clearly understand that. Stick with them, and you'll live longer."

"Chief." Dave began to comment. "Black Ops 08 was able to push you around, and he beat you in King of the Hill. We weren't able to do this, and we tried nearly ten times. And he didn't have powered SPI armor or MJOLNIR. Can you explain this?"

Kelly turned to Kate. "Tell them."

Kate began to explain to the rest of her team what Mathew was doing. She told them how he ordered her and made her think; to study the terrain and possible solutions to her opponent's actions. She told them how he was always analyzing, thinking, putting her into positions to score, while distracting Kelly. "And it wasn't that he was simply running a basic diversion, he was utilizing the terrain to his advantage and anticipating the Chief's actions." She said.

"The Black Ops utilize stealth." Kelly remarked. "I knew he would do this, but it's almost impossible to predict an opponent's actions."

Once I began to trail in points, I had to become more aggressive. That was when he directly attacked me, and let 017 score."

The conversation continued but it was suddenly stopped as Rose approached. She had an awkward smile but she approached the group and stood silently at the side. Kelly was the first to notice her presence and quickly walked closer to her.

"Have you seen 19?" Kelly asked.

"Oh.. yeah, I have." She shied away from the question. "Eric and Mathew are getting dressed." Kate, with her enhanced SPI armor hearing, walked closer to Rose.

Kelly added. "Oh, so they are trying on the armor you made?"

"Yeah. But Melanie didn't make it."

"05?" Kelly sighed. "She was a great soldier. She'll be missed."

Kate interrupted. "Armor, ma'am?"

"Yes. I took a few SPI armor parts and adapted them for the Black Ops while you were training. I made the same modifications to them as I did to yours."

A metal grind echoed in the mechanical bay and everyone turned toward the closet door. Two figures emerged, both wearing SPI armor, however, instead of the deep green seen on the traditional Spartan colors, Eric and Mathew's SPI armor was painted black, and their helmet visors were silver-reflective.

Rose smiled at seeing them in their Armor. Eric walked out first, his call number written on his shoulder in small grey numbers. She gleefully walked up to him and examined the straps. She helped him adjust his armor so that they fit a little more snug and then she stepped back with a wide eyed smile.

"This is my contribution, Eric. My way of helping you win this war."

Eric looked down at Rose and then examined his HUD. He turned on his private line to Mathew and looked at his long time friend.

"Heyâ€¦ Mathew."

"Yeah Eric?" Mathew laughed back, in awe of the new armor he was wearing.

"We aren't dreaming."

"No man." Mathew laughed. "This is real."

Eric lifted his hands and starred at them as he activated his camouflage. He then turned it off and whistled into the radio. "We made it, Mathew. We're Spartans."

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Hammer of God

> Sangheili-Human controlled ship
 Camp Eden

The ship flowed with workers, mechanics, human and alien, as Siren explored thousands of digital videos in her virtual world. She was in complete control of the ship and with each passing moment she knew she was getting closer to what needed to be done.

"If only I could have acted sooner. I could have saved you, Mel." Siren zoomed a camera into the nearby temporary grave yard. She quickly closed the view and waved her hands over the numerous video feeds; closing them. "Doctor Halsey never noticed that I was able to fully copy the code." Siren gazed into the data stream in her hands. Everything she needed to know about the Path of Reclamation, and the Ark. Siren then knelt and pulled her knees into her chest.

"Is this the right thing to do, Cortana?" She questioned to herself. "Must it be done this way?" In front of Siren appeared the Luminous Key, the very Key that Cortana had taken from Regret and Gravemind; the Key to controlling the Ark. She had sent it to Earth with the copy of herself in order to save humanity; but at what cost.

The Crystal shifted and changed forms multiple times as it floated just within arm's reach of Siren. Then, beside the pink glowing Key, a video window opened. It was the last thing Cortana had given Siren before she was deleted. Siren watched the Path of Reclamation video and then overlapped it with the video that Cortana had given her. The picture of the Ark firing in the Reclamation video was identical to the image that Cortana had recreated from the future. Cortana had seen the end of the universe.

"This is the way the world ends." Siren sobbed as she watched the two displays. "Not with a bang, but a whimper."

****To be continued.****

20. Warhammer

****NOTES: ****A little over 3 years ago I began this Trilogy with "Stand, Five Feet High", I never thought it would become this big and have such a following. But now, here we are on the verge of Halo 3 and the Final 4 Levels of the concluding book. With this I will begin the final push to the end. As I told most of you on the Bungie forums, not everything can be answered, as some Mysteries of Halo should always remain. So without further delay, and many thanks to those who have followed this trilogy, here is the first Level of the last Story Arc. Three more levels follow and they will play directly in-line with the Halo 3 story. Enjoy.

* * *

><p>Level 20: Warhammer

Seed Ship

> November 11, 2552- -Slip Space Time difference - - null<p>

A flash split across space. Ripples followed in the visual spectrum and mass of metal equal to the size of a small asteroid slipped into existence. The double shaped pyramid returned to the Sol System, and

with it the surviving Sangheili of the purest blood. Elder Vornaldea, sitting upon the head of the massive Seed Ship's command deck, cursed as he realized their location.

"Keeper!" He roared in protest. "These are not the coordinates that were programmed. This is the human territory!"

The slender alien appeared at Vornaldea's side. "Really. I must admit that going to Halo would have been far more interesting, however, protocols must be obeyed and not even you can disregard that."

"We must do our part in this battle." Vornaldea countered.

"Be thankful, Elder, that I have not the limited programming of the Monitors. Else your entire race would be floating in space right now. My Protocols take higher precedence in this situation. Be thankful I am letting you tag along for the ride."

Vornaldea fell silent. He sensed a threat from the AI that had never been present before. The construct faded from view and surely enough, his race was no longer able to control the Seed Ship.

"Communications?" Vornaldea questioned

"Yes sir! Fully operational."

"At least we have that much control." Vornaldea huffed. "Where are the main fleet and Supreme Commander Timnaldee?"

"They have not arrived in system yet. We arrived before them."

"The speed of this ship astounds me." Vornaldea sighed.

The Keeper spoke through the command deck intercom, "I am the second fastest creation of the Forerunner Empire."

"What is your plan for coming here?" Vornaldea replied.

"To collect samples, of course. I must preserve the new life forms on this world before the firing of the Ark. This world has seen an abundance of evolutionary growth over the past hundred thousand years. It must be preserved. The Forerunners took great service in protecting this planetoid, and I shall do the same."

"And what of us?"

"Like all other life forms in the galaxy, you will be erased. But be thankful, I will also be gathering samples from you as well. You will be repopulatedâ€¦ eventually."

Vornaldea gritted his teeth and turned to his crew. "Alert Commander Yalsmadee to prepare to disembark. We need to get our troops to Earth and help prevent this catastrophe."

"Sir â€¦ Commander Yalsmadeeâ€¦ he is in the shrine."

"Then tell him to get to the flag ship!" Vornaldea shouted.

"Mighty elderâ€¦ that is not itâ€¦ it is the Queen. She has

awakened. "

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Steam hissed from all sides as interlocking springs disengaged from the cold slab of metal. The stasis field around the Queen's chamber vanished and the metal case split slowly. Slowly it rose to a standing position as Queen Vasmeola stretched. She stepped forward, her armor showing no sign of change, and looked to her oldest son in shock.

She looked around, confused about her environment, and even more confused about the dozen of female elders kneeling before her. "What has happened? What is this place, Commander?"

Yalsmadee wanted to reach out and kiss the top of his mother's helmet. He was truly thankful that she was alive and well, but more importantly he had to show the proper discipline. He knelt before her, with the females, and addressed her expressly. "This is the seed ship, my Queen. It is under the command of our High Council. They arrived just as your ship was being boarded by the Sentinel Drones. The construct aboard this ship managed to shut them down in time to prevent the self destruct of your ship."

"Casualty report." Vasmeola stated as she sat upon a nearby bench. Various foods and drink were scattered about and she began to eat. She didn't understand why, but she was hungry; extremely hungry. She was unaware that she was in stasis lock for several days, and while she did not age her body went through several changes. As the Commander gave his report, Vasmeola's every need was addressed by the elder females nearby. Some of the faces she instantly recognized, however there were more females than normal. Instead of the normal five elder females that attended to her, there were now twelve.

She stopped the Commanders report. "Where did the rest of you come from?"

Yalsmadee instantly realized that he had not yet told her. "Forgive me, my Queen. The error is not in the elders, but in me." The elder females turned to Yalsmadee as he stood by his mother's side. "All of our civilians are on board this ship. Its size can accommodate our entire race. This is our home, for now. Dorenthâ€| has been destroyed. Before you are the twelve elder females representing the highest Houses within our race."

Vasmeola glared at him in shock. "Our homeâ€| but what of our colonies?"

An elder female spoke up. "They are under Jiralhanae control. Though most of their armada is on Earth, they still have more than a few soldiers stationed on our Colonies."

Yalsmadee nodded in agreement. "Yes, but their forces are very thin. As I was told by the High Elder, the Hierarchs scattered the Sangheili fleet as thin as possible so that the Jiralhanae could ensnare us easily. The colonies were left with only a minor detachment of forces in order to defend."

Vasmeola lowered her head in thought. "The Mirratord were right. But not even they could have seen this coming."

The door to the temple parted, and several Sangheili males entered, led by Elder Vornaldea. "My Queen." He nervously stated as he and his honor guard detail knelt.

Vasmeola recognized him by his armor and head dress. "High Elder." She stood from her bench, grabbed a hand full of fruits and approached the Elder. "Please, join me."

High Elder Vornaldea, Queen Vasmeola, Commander Yalsmadee, and the head female elder sat in a circle in the center of the room. The other eleven elder females brought food and drink to them as they discussed their future.

Vornaldea could not avoid asking the elder female a question that had been plaguing him for some time. "Are you the mother of our famed Second?"

"Second?" She questioned as she rubbed her lower mandibles in thought.

Vasmeola cut in. "Speaking of this should no longer be a mystery, Meyala. We are amongst trustworthy kin."

"Meyala!" Vornaldea suddenly cheered. "You are. You are the mother of Simyaldee!"

Meyala simply nodded a response. "He was my youngest, but his brother died in combat many years ago at the hands of the humans. It appears that his father's bravery and skill did not pass to his older siblings." She sighed. Meyala was old, her age was undocumented as the Mirratord had erased her past many years ago however Regret's ambition to build his own private army of Sangheili was able to discover her. "How is Simyaldee? Is he here? I was thankful that Regret's slave traders were unable to find him."

"He is on Earth fighting with the humans." Vornaldea drank some wine and turned his attention back to Meyala. "Thanks to the Mirratord, he has remained a bit of an enigma. The Covenant knew of him, but not that he was who he was."

Yalsmadee tore the meat from a bone and questioned that statement. "How is that possible? Did he not carry his name in battle?"

Vornaldea smirked. "Your father is perhaps the most feared warrior within our service. He has never failed a mission. He has never been beaten. The only reason he has not ascended to the rank of Commander, or Supreme Commander, is because of his devotion to the Mirratord. Even though the Covenant knows of him, they dare not approach him. But for the sake of his name, we attempted to keep him off the record as much as possible. Throughout the human war he has served under the direct command of Commander Vadumee of the Spec Ops."

"Vadumee? Of the Dum house?" Meyala questioned.

"The same." Vornaldea added. "And if you are thinking what I am thinking, then I can clearly say, yes. Simyaldee is stronger than Vadumee, though they are long term friends and have yet to fully test each other. There is something in Simyaldee's eyes. Something about

him that tells me that he can not be bested in combat." He turned to Yalsmadee. "Be proud, warrior. Your father's name carries a great weight upon the Sangheili race."

Vasmeola smiled inwardly. Her first mate had grown into a fearsome warrior, this was something that would make any female gleeful, but the weight of her crown bore down upon her and she quickly remembered that she had more pressing matters. "High Elder, why are we heading to Earth? I do recall my specific instructions being given to my Commander. We should be attacking Halo."

"The Keeper, the construct of this ship, is responding to the Ark. His protocols have overridden our course of action. Your fleet is in our wake and will arrive shortly. It seems he also took command of those ships. Once the fleet arrives I will join them with Supreme Commander Timnaldee's fleet. They will be sent to Halo and

"No." Vasmeola stated.

"My Queen?" Vornaldea questioned.

"That is not an order I can agree with." Vasmeola added. "We are here, the fleet will arrive shortly, and if we return to Halo the battle may be lost before we arrive. No. I think we shall do what we can to stop the Hierarchs. When the Ark is stopped, then we shall destroy the Halo's."

Vornaldea huffed his displeasure. "My Queen, the council has decided. We can not stay here with the Civilians in tow. If we engage in combat with the Covenant, here on Earth, we jeopardize our race's existence. If we destroy one Halo then we have a chance at survival."

Vasmeola stood from the floor. "For the past eighty cycles I have been in charge of my kin. Rebuilding our race on a far away star and preparing for this day to face the Covenant. I have fought many battles, High Elder, and I will not stand aside and let the Council dictate what they feel is the better option. If we leave Earth now we run the risk of dieing in Slip Space when the Halo's are activated. We will do what we can here! If the Keeper brought us here then we can not force ourselves to turn back. I understand that the Council wishes to do what is best for the civilians, but we can not take the chance. We fight here."

Yalsmadee finished his meal and stood. "I will begin organizing the fleet. High Elder, please make contact with the Supreme Commander with Timnaldee. I wish to speak with him and understand the battle at Earth."

"What are you talking about?" Vornaldea steamed. "We must first put this decision before the Council. I know time is crucial, but we must have discipline." Yalsmadee smirked as he knew his mother would not respond well to that statement.

Sure enough, Vasmeola began to vent. "Discipline? Honor? In my youth, I loved these words. I prided myself in hopefully one day becoming a soldier like my father, but your discipline denied me this for fear of jeopardizing your precious Mirrator'd secrets. It was hard enough to be a female watchman, but to also be under the House of Vas was

painful within itself. All of my life I have struggled because I am different, High Elder, and now that I am the Queen I am going to change things. We are at war, and getting together to talk Politics with a bunch of wrinkled elders is not how I intend to fight. You tell the Elders that those who are still able to lift their swords will be welcome in my campaign. Anyone who wishes to spill Brute blood should not be denied that glory."

Meyala coughed, interrupting Vasmeola's rant. "The young may take your words too directly, my Queen." She smirked.

Vasmeola sighed. "Aside from the young and elderly, High Elder." She respected Meyala's wisdom and level headedness.

Vornaldea stood from his seat, finished his wine and knelt before the Queen. "Thank you. It will be an honor to fight by your side, my Queen. Not sense the days before the Covenant have we had a ruler with your passion for combat." Vornaldea stood and glared at the Queen's eyes. "Lead us, and we will follow without question."

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Hammer of God

> Sangheili-Human controlled ship
 Camp Eden, Earth

Nora'k Binyalda. The name sounded in Simyaldee's head constantly over the past few hours. The brute Chieftain, Grimleon, knew of his father and this angered Simyaldee to no end. How was it that a brute knew of his father and perhaps even knew how he died? Simyaldee rubbed his head in thought, but found that there was no use struggling to understand it.

"Lieutneant!" Screamed a human crewman. "Proximity alarms are sounding. Fast movers inbound!"

Simyaldee stepped to the edge of the command podium and powered on his display. The image showed six seraph fighters streaking toward the ship.

Siren commented over the com. "Ground forces are also on the move, Lieutenant. One full regiment, perhaps more. I'm raising shields and alerting our ground defense units."

"Siren, watch for Anti-Aircraft bombardments." Simyaldee ordered.

"Understoodâ€| uh oh, too late." Siren sulked. "Incoming plasma volley from â€| six-kilo-west."

An Elite weapons controller shouted. "Bringing up plasma turrets. Tracking volley and locking onto their position. Blast, they are too far away. We do not have an angle."

"What about those Seraphs?" Simyaldee questioned.

"Human air defense is preparing to engage." Another elite replied.

Siren cut into the comment. "Jammers! The Seraph's are dropping Jammers on us and around the region! I'm losing visual and radar!"

A voice cut in from the back of the command deck. "Weapons, track the Seraphs! Helm, move the ship two-kilo-south. We have to get away from Eden and draw their fire!" Simyaldee turned and watched as a human female ran to the top of the command podium and she continued to bark orders. "Siren, fire a blind shot in front of the Seraph's projected flight path. Give them a scare!"

"Eye-eye Captain! It's good to see you, ma'am!"

"Better late than never, I always wanted to say." The human female decorated in full Navy Captain dress, white's and grays, turned to Simyaldee. "I don't think we've had a chance to actually speak, Lieutenant." She extended her hand and said, "Captain Megan Monroe, I heard that you needed an able bodied ship master."

Simyaldee smirked. "Indeed." Simyaldee took her hand, dwarfing it in his palm, and gave it a solid shake. Human customs were awkward, but he managed to do it with a straight face.

Captain Monroe turned to the display. "Siren, we're flying blind with those jammers on top of us. Open a com to our fighter pilots. I need to know what's happening out there."

The ship rocked to one side, then again and again. "Plasma volley impact. Direct hit on our upper shield grid. They have some sharp shooters out there."

"Those AA guns are well out of range of plasma cannons while we are at this altitude." Simyaldee commented. "We could fire back if we went higher."

"We do that and we leave Eden Defenseless to ground attack." Monroe added. "Someone did a lot of thinking for this attack. Siren, analysis?"

"This is a Prophet like command structure. But according to Intel all of the minor Prophets are stationed south at the Ark site. The jammer drops have blinded us from getting target locks on the fighters or from seeing the AA plasma volleys."

"We are also blind of any ground forces that could be moving into the area!" Simyaldee protested.

Captain Monroe thumbed her chin. "With the Black Ops gone, Lieutenant, you can do a better job if you're on the ground with the Mirratord. Keep an open COM to me and I'll radio what I can."

Simyaldee didn't waste any time. He turned and trotted into a full sprint off the Command deck.

The ship rumbled once again. "Damn. Shield strength?"

"Eighty percent, ma'am!" Shot back a human officer.

"Track the location of those impacts and shift power from the aft shields to compensate. If they begin to redirect their focus, shift on the fly."

An elite gave an outcry. "We are clear of Eden's interior."

"Communications, contact Eden Tower and tell them to power up the directional shield grid. Weapons, target the last known location of those AA cannons and return fire."

The elite weapons controller replied back. "But we do not have a sufficient angle."

"No matter. All I want to do is give them a little something to worry about. We don't have any forces in their path, so full power and make as much destruction as possible!"

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Brute regiment // Red Clan
> Four miles West of Camp Eden<p>

Plasma mortars fired gigantic swells of Plasma into the air as Grimleon watched the Hammer of God move. He waved for his AA controllers to adjust the cannons as the Seraph's dropped their jammers throughout the region.

He powered off his zoom and turned to his ground units. A sea of Brute Phantoms, Seraphs and land vehicles all sat before him. He raised his Gravity hammer and roared. "You have your orders! Today we end our quest! Bring me the head of Simyald!" All the members of the Red Clan roared in anticipation. Grimleon turned around, mounted his chopper and sped toward the ship.

The full regiment under his command followed. A giant dust storm swelled around as the vehicles powered ahead. The Phantom's were the first to arrive, deploying foot soldiers throughout the area beneath the Hammer of God.

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Simyaldee descended down the gravity lift and watched as twelve Phantoms began to deploy troops. "Captain, ground units are being deployed directly below the ship!"

Captain Monroe cursed over the com. "Damn it! They slipped in while the jammers were blinding us! Lieutenant, the full ground unit is under your guard. We'll do what we can up here."

Simyaldee watched as the human, grunt and Sangheili troops took up defensive position against the quickly deploying opposition. The brutes were setting up fast, too fast. They were well organized. The phantoms provided covering fire, crystallizing the thin vegetation that sat outside Eden, in an attempt to lay waste to the allied troops nearby. And as the phantoms fired the troops were dropping to the ground in waves.

Simyaldee couldn't wait to be lowered to the ground below and he jumped the last forty feet from the gravity lift. He hit the ground, rolled and kept running. He switched his com to the nearby friendly frequency. "Focus all fire on the area beneath the phantoms." It was a blind order as the dense vegetation growing on south side of Eden was making it hard for his troops to even see where the phantoms

were, but Simyaldee was able to see them as he descended from the gravity lift.

As he ran forward he arrived at the rear lines. "Who's in command here?"

"The little guy." A human shot back from a rock cover. "The grunt." Explosions sounded up ahead.

Simyaldee looked up and could see Palab attempting to rally his troops. "Sergeant. Their ground troops are attempting to flank your position. You need to watch yourâ€|"

A brute snarled as he stampeded through two humans, crushing them beneath his weight. Their screams faded quickly. Simyaldee spun and dived at the beast, and it quickly fell over dead, but no one actually saw Simyaldee pull his blades from his belt; there was a quick buzz of static and then nothing. Simyaldee rolled the creature over to its back and looked at his chest armor. A brute hand print, painted red with blood, sat upon the dead creature's armor.

"The Red Clan." Simyaldee mumbled. Grimleon was coming.

Simyaldee looked up as weapons fire started again. Human forces were shouting out targets and congratulating one another, or running for cover, while the elites charged to better firing positions. Cursing with every step they made.

Palab and his grunts lobbed grenades into the thick brush, attempting to flush out the brutes. Simyaldee ran up to Palab and glared forward. "What can you tell me?"

"Lots of Brutes come." The Grunt Messiah shouted. "Me not seen them work like this. They try to push us out of trees, into open desert."

Simyaldee looked back. Sure enough there was a clear path to the desert only a few hundred yards away. Weapons fire sounded to the opposite side as a human's scream echoed throughout the trees. The Brutes were extending their flank and they were trying to push them out of the jungle. Simyaldee had to halt this.

"Captain, we need vehicle assistance at our location." Simyaldee radioed. "Send them to the south of the forest region and patrol the desert. The brutes are attempting to force us out of the forest, perhaps to lead us into a trap."

"Roger that, Lieutenant. I'll contact Eden's transport bay. Mobile Infantry should be on their way to you shortly."

The COM died and Simyaldee patted Palab on the shoulder. "Do not let them push you back until the vehicle units arrive. I will assess this situation further." Simyaldee strolled toward the flanking brutes. His active camouflage washed over him and he vanished in the brush.

Palab bounded into a tree and then jumped off of a tree branch into a thick of brutes. He extended his elbow spikes, and waited for the first brute to react. They all staggered backwards, but one of them raised a carbine and Palab bounded toward him. His blade easily

penetrated the brute's shields, as they were designed to stop fast moving weapons fire, and he jammed it into the brute's chest. He then racked his claws across the brute's throat and watched as blood spat outward. Palab turned and attacked the others.

A few yards away, brute blood sprayed all around the area as one by one Simyaldee cut through them with little difficulty. He emerged from his cloak covered in blood, and waved for his team to approach. As if on cue, six Mirrator elites appeared from camouflage and gathered at his side. They all peered at the massing Brute's but none of them could see who was in command. There was something else awkward about this deployment and it was seriously troubling Simyaldee.

They were not deploying their Jackals or Grunts.

"Fan out." Simyaldee ordered to his team. "Let us deal with this pack and see how they respond." Simyaldee then opened his com to his ground units. "All teams, hold your position and do not retreat. The Brutes are moving us toward the desert, and we can not let them gain this forest region."

Several confirmations replied in his com as the numerous sergeants and corporals in command agreed to Simyaldee's orders.

Another radio com burst into Simyaldee's ears. "Lieutenant, this is Mobile Infantry 103 out of Charley Company. We've arrived at that desert region you wanted us to patrol."

"What is your compliment?"

"Six hogs, eight mongoose, two MBT's, and four hornets." The man replied.

"Setup a strike area. Prepare to aid our retreat if needed."

"Roger that."

The COM died and Simyaldee returned his attention to the brutes ahead. "Go." He whispered to his team. They all vanished with a soft pulse as the active camouflage dwarfed them. Silently the crept towards their prey, and once they were within striking range they powered on their plasma swords and laid quick waste to the brutes. Simyaldee stepped forward examined the fallen brutes and then crept out of the opening.

Something felt odd.

The radio crackled in Simyaldee's ears "Lieutenant, we're under heavy fire from a swarm of brute fast movers!" Simyaldee stood and listened as explosion sounded in the distance. "Don't come out of the forest! I repeatâ€¦ don't--" the transmission faded into static. "Mobile Infantry! Can any of you hear me?" Static was his only response. They had been wiped out, or completely cut off from communications. Either way it was not a good situation.

Ground forces in the forest and vehicle units waiting at the desert's edge. Simyaldee contacted the ship. "Captainâ€¦"

"I heard." Monroe replied. "Lieutenant, the attack wave is clever."

Their forces are bigger then we think, and I'm still blind up here!" She snarled. "They deployed a second wave of jammers." Monroe paused on the radio and then questioned. "The Brutes are never this organized."

"This is not a normal attack." Simyaldee replied. "Their leader is well trained."

Palab stumbled to Simyaldee's side. "More ground forces on the way. Me scouts see wraiths moving into area."

"Captain, if we relay coordinates to you can you hit them?"

"You bet I can!" Captain Monroe ran down the ramp and stood with the weapons officers. "Stand bye. The lieutenant will relay target vectors." She ordered the gunners.

The elites nodded and waited.

Simyaldee slipped into his cloak and raced through the forest until he was well beyond the safety of his detachment. He was completely surrounded by the Brutes but he went further behind their lines. He climbed a tree over looking the very edge of the forest and watched as several dozen waves of wraith's hovered into position. Simyaldee then began to quietly relay their position.

He looked over head, at the bottom of the mammoth ship and watched as several plasma turrets turned into position. The ship then began to fire streams of plasma into the advancing line. Only a few molten husks remained after the relatively small volley of fire. Simyaldee then looked toward the desert region where the human mobile infantry had been killed, and he watched as the brute vehicles quickly moved closer to the forest. After seeing the ship hit their line of tanks, the brute vehicle patrol moved inside the firing range of the ships plasma turrets.

But what also had Simyaldee concerned was that now they were coming directly into the forest where his unit of humans, grunts and elites were holding position. "Palab, the rear! Watch the rear!" He turned and quickly began to sprint back, and he couldn't afford to be cautious about his speed. Tree branches snapped at his side, leaves flicked and bobbed, and with all the commotion he was making it was inevitable that the weapons fire would begin.

The first few plasma blasts washed over his armor and powered off his cloak. Simyaldee powered on his twin blades and cut his way through anyone that came into his path. Plasma and spike rounds impacted his shields, but his enhanced Mirrator system was holding. Speed was his only concern now. He cut down two brutes that foolishly attempted to attack him and he never broke stride.

Had he made an error? Simyaldee rethought his past actions. This was his command and he was aware that they were not all Mirrator, but he knew that if they were overwhelmed then defending the area would not be easy. No, he had made the right decision, but he had not fully thought out all of his opponents moves. Simyaldee felt foolish. His opponent, Grimeleon, had made all the right tactical choices so far.

Palab radioed. "Humans defending rear are dieing! Me shift Mirrator

units to assist. Vehicles now coming into forest."

Perhaps Grimleon had not fully outfoxed him. Simyaldee smirked. "Palab, move everyone into the trees. We shall lose movement, but we will gain a tactical advantage."

"Me understand."

Simyaldee hoped that would buy his units some time. It was a worthless maneuver, but one that he needed to use in order to gain more time. He finally cut threw the last Brute at the front line and dashed toward the rear assault. As he ran, several Mirrator that were on the front line joined him.

"We are with you, Second!" One shouted.

"What are the odds?" Simyaldee asked as they sprinted through the grunt packs and the humans in the central advance.

"Many of them. Few of us." The elite laughed.

"Excellent. I did not wish to think that my running back here was for nothing."

With three Mirrator warriors under his wing, Simyaldee charged ahead and saw that the human and elite forces were shooting from the treetop branches. Beneath them were the brute vehicles, bounding over tree stumps in the thick uneven vegetation.

"For the honor of the Mirrator." Simyaldee unsheathed his blades and dashed forward. His kin split up at his side, each pursuing their own targets.

Palab echoed on the radio. "Forces cease fire!"

Simyaldee was thankful to hear the grunts king's raspy voice, knowing now that he was still alive, and then hurled himself toward the first brute chopper that came near. Simyaldee kicked the brute from the seat, took over the menacing device and turned toward the same Brute he had just hijacked. The chopper's wheels cut the creature down without slowing and Simyaldee steered toward a gathering of ghosts. He plowed into the mass as they attempted to scatter, crushing one and damaging two. The brute chopper handled wildly over the rough forest basin and Simyaldee lost control for a moment; steering the monstrous vehicle into a tree. The massive tree trunk split but did not completely give. Simyaldee jolted in his seat and attempted to restart the controls. The engine hummed but would not start.

A plasma barrage hit Simyaldee in the back. He turned to see three brutes racing toward him in their ghosts, but Palab sprang from almost nowhere and killed one. He then leapt to the other, landed on the ghost's fuselage and kicked the brute pilot in the face. He jumped off and left a boiling plasma grenade stuck to the hull, and as he rolled to his feet he pulled up his plasma pistol and overcharged it at the third speeding ghost. The overcharged plasma discharged and homed in on the ghost and overloaded its systems, shutting it down. A human sniper then put two rounds into the brute pilot's head just as the plasma grenade on the second ghost exploded.

Simyaldee freed himself from the wrecked chopper and nodded toward the grunt messiah. They shared a quick glare and Palab smirked from behind his mask. They then returned to the battle.

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A radio burst sounded in Grimleon's ear. "Chieftain! I have found him! He and the Grunt King are holding off our vehicle unit at the rear of the human formation. There are several more of those pesky elites with him, but we shall hold them at bay. The prize is yours, mighty Chieftain."

Grimleon smiled and accelerated deeper into the forest.

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Simyaldee rolled as a ghost zipped past him and he pulled up a plasma grenade and flung it at the back of the ghost as it turned back. The grenade stuck and the stupid brute panicked at the wheel. He attempted to jump free but was hurled into a tree by the speed of the ghost. The grenade exploded sending ghost parts across the tundra. Simyaldee turned and ran toward the wounded Brute and prepared to deliver the killing blow when he heard a thunderous crunch.

Simyaldee turned and watched as a brute chopper bounced off of a tree stump and sailed over his head, while the pilot of the chopper jumped off and fell directly at Simyaldee. The sun glinted off of the golden armor of Grimleon, and as he pulled down his hammer Simyaldee could see the bloody hand print upon his chest. The hammer bore down at Simyaldee, but the agile elite dodged swiftly.

The gravity hammer glowed, struck the ground and sent dust and leaves skyward. Simyaldee instantly switched to inferred and watched as Grimleon attempted to circle him. Simyaldee tightened his grip on his blades, planted one huff behind him and spun to face his opponent.

The dust parted as a mass of alien metal and fluctuating energy came downward toward the Mirrator's, Second in command. The gravity hammer sputtered as it emitted its gravity defying wave, but with all the scattered debris floating about, Simyaldee could easily track the gravity weapon's location. He ducked the first gravity pulse and rolled forward. He planted his feet and stood with his blade angled against his forearm. The hilt of Grimleon's hammer struck the sword and Simyaldee raised his other sword into his opponent's midsection, but Grimleon's shield unit swelled around him and with his left hand, which was also engulfed by the shield, he grabbed Simyaldee's sword and held it at bay.

The two fierce warriors paused and judged their next actions. Simyaldee glared upward, into Grimleon's nearly eight foot stance and pushed upward with his single blade. The gravity hammer's hilt barely flinched. Simyaldee was not going to out muscle him.

"So now our fate is locked, Sangheili." Grimleon snarled. "Unlike before, I have no intentions of testing you. When we are done, I will carry your head like a trophy!" Grimleon pressed forward with his hammer. Even with one hand he was able to push Simyaldee with little effort.

"You will find that I am â€| rather attached to my head." Simyaldee strained. "Brute, tell me what you know of my father!"

Simyaldee rolled free, twisting his sword from Grimleon's grip and stood to face the brute as he charged.

There was wrestling of leaves at Grimleon's side and two elites spring from the brush. The two Mirratord warriors stabbed outward to assist Simyaldee, but they had already doomed their fate.

"Fools!" Grimleon roared as he spun toward them.

"No!" Simyaldee rebuked, but his words were unheard as Grimleon spun his hammer and impacted both Elites. The hammer glowed brightly as power swelled into the blow and the two Mirratord warriors were blasted several feet into the air. Simyaldee watched as one of the elites rolled backwards in an awkward way, clearly his spine had been shattered. And the other of his kin no longer had a head. They had served with Simyaldee for many years and had served him well. They were well trained, disciplined and skilled. They both had children who were still alive with their mothers on the Seed Ship. They were both Simyaldee's brothers at arms. Two of his kin had suddenly been taken away.

Grimleon cupped his hammer before him and stood facing Simyaldee. "Will you not face me alone? Do you need aid from your Mirratord pets?"

Simyaldee opened his COM. "None of you can handle the chieftain. He is mine. Palab, you have command. Deal with the rest of the Red Clan's forces."

"But Sir?" A Mirratord shouted over the com. Several Mirratord elites appeared from active camouflage, snarling with anticipation to test their skill against this particular brute Chieftain. "He has slain our brothers before our eyes! Let us try him. Let us see who can best him. How long has it been since we, the Mirratord, have a met a worthy opponent?"

Simyaldee looked around at his brothers. He knew how they felt. Grimleon was a skilled and aged vet. Many enemies had fallen before him and fighting him would take every ounce of their training. "No. If he kills me, then you can all feel free to do as you like. For nowâ€| this Brute is mine."

The Mirratord held back. Some turned and went to assist in the battle raging around them, but others were not going to abandon the Second's side without seeing him fight.

Simyaldee cracked his shoulder, lowered his posture, angled his left arm toward Grimleon and pulled his right arm back.

Grimleon smiled. "Finally, I shall be rid of your disgusting family!" His shields flared to full power, surrounding him in a bubble of glowing energy. He stepped forward, angled his hammer back and quick stepped toward Simyaldee.

Grimleon was again showing his incredible land speed and agility. His massive muscles carried him as gracefully as a dancer, yet with the

weight of a tank. His first swing missed Simyaldee completely. Simyaldee was able to strike him in the side, but the over-shield didn't falter. Grimleon pulled back the hammer, almost in mid swing, and hit Simyaldee in the back with the hilt of his hammer. Simyaldee rolled forward, sprang up with his arm, tucked in the air and threw a Plasma grenade at Grimleon, it suck and flared. The explosion washed over the over-shield and Grimleon continued to give chase, unfazed. Simyaldee landed, dodged, side stepped and cut across Grimleon's exposed back.

Still nothing.

The hammer came around from a near impossible angle. Simyaldee did not see how he was able to maneuver in such a way. He couldn't avoid the hammer. Simyaldee crossed his arms and let the grav-hammer impact his twin blades, but Simyaldee angled them slightly so that they wouldn't overload from the hit. The gravity hammer pulsed and fired Simyaldee outward, through the upper canopy of trees and into the desert. Simyaldee rolled into the hot sand and gathered his bearings. He stood and examined his blades, they were still intact. But the power had been considerably drained. He looked up as Grimleon sprinted out of the forest like a wild rhino charging in for the kill.

Simyaldee was amazed at how someone his size could move with such agility. Beating Grimleon was going to be taxing. He was not going to beat this brute with power or tricks. He knelt low, spread his stance apart so that he could dodge in any direction, pulled up his blades to a close shoulder guard location and readied himself as Grimleon plowed toward him.

Simyaldee was going to need all of his skill to survive this encounter.

Palab watched as the fully armored brute barreled out of the forest chasing after the Mirrator Second. The grunt King had no desire in abandoning his leader and the one Sangheili that showed the most interest in seeing his kin return home, but he also knew that he needed to lead the ground forces and fight back the brute assault. But this attack seemed very strange to Palab. Once the brute chieftain appeared, the majority of the brute attack force had backed off. Had they been ordered to withdraw? The brutes could have continued to assault the rear flank, caused more trouble and completely pinned the ground forces, yet they retreated to the diagonal assault on the flanks. The brutes returned their focus to the front lines. Why?

"Sergeant Palab, do you read?" Siren commented into the COM.

Palab awoke from his dazed thought. "I hear you Siren. Do you see what is happening down here?" Palab replied in his native tongue.

"At the moment, yes." Siren replied. "But more Seraphs are inbound, and I am sure they have more jammers. The Captain wants to know if she can launch Banshee fighters to help defend the ship? Our Airforce was called back to guard Eden."

"I'll check." Palab climbed a nearby tree. He then popped his head out of the top of the canopy and examined the area. Aside for a few

Seraph patrols and phantoms steadily dropping off troops there was little threat for a Banshee flight patrol. "I do not see any AA guns nearby, only the ones that are firing in the distance, a banshee patrol should be able to launch without problems."

"Thank you Sergeant." Siren replied.

Palab began to climb down and watched as the brute vehicles continued to fire and speed recklessly through the thick brush below. Palab jumped out of the tree and onto the back of a speeding ghost. The brute pilot snarled as Palab began to claw at its back.

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Simyaldee dodged again as the mammoth brute slammed his massive hammer into the ground. Simyaldee attempted to counter, but once again Grimleon closed the opening and parried his advance. Grimleon was skilled. No, that was understatement. Grimleon was a master of the Gravity Hammer. He held tightly, but at the same time he could loosely grip it with one hand and swing it around his head like a mace and chain.

Simyaldee knew that rushing in without finding a weakness would only get him killed. But then, without even looking for it, he realized the brute's one weakness.

Grimleon laughed. "What ails you, Sangheili? Have I struck that much fear in your heart?"

Simyaldee powered off his right blade, his power hand, and clipped his blade to his hip holster. With his left blade he simply waited. He began to jog around Grimleon, dancing at a distance, waiting for the moment to attack.

"One blade? What have you got on your mind?" Grimleon growled. Sand kicked up as he spun in a circle. But Simyaldee didn't become aggressive, no, he was a Spec Ops Mirrator and patience was his best skill. "Very well. I'll see what you have in store." Grimleon dashed forward.

Simyaldee then showed his trump card. With his free hand he dropped a plasma grenade into the sand. It quickly flared brightly and exploded and sent a mountain of sand skyward. Grimleon, unafraid of a little sand, dashed into it blindly and lost sight of Simyaldee for a split second.

The moment seemed to freeze. Simyaldee rolled forward, crossed his left blade in front of him, and as expected Grimleon could not bring down his hammer fast enough. In the same manner as he had always countered any of Simyaldee's quick approaches, Grimleon lowered his hilt instead.

Success.

Simyaldee reached out with his right hand, grabbed the gravity hammer, spun his body and scrapped his left blade over Grimleon's arm shields. It was now a battle of speed and reflexes.

Grimleon was a mountain of muscle; an avalanche barreling forward to kill anything in his path. He was fast and powerful, yet he did not

know that Simyaldee had his hand on the Gravity Hammer. Grimleon's power was not a factor, as he did not know what was soon going to happen. All the muscle power in his body could not prepare him for something that could respond faster than he could think.

Feeling the blade scrapping across his arms, Grimleon instantly realized that Simyaldee was in close proximity, and his natural instinct was to swing his hammer. He adjusted his grip, by relaxing his fingers and sliding his hand lower down the hilt. However, the moment his grip became loose Simyaldee, with his power hand holding the hilt as well, pulled the hammer free. Grimleon felt the loose hammer give in his finger tips, and he reached out to grab it, but it was too late. The hammer was gone. He had adjusted his grip hundreds of times in the last few minutes, but never had the hammer simply been pulled away.

Grimleon ran forward, his eyes wide and shock washing over his onetime calm demeanor. He stopped and turned. His eyes glared into Simyaldee as the Sangheili Mirrator Second in command held the Gravity hammer in his right hand, and casually rested it upon his shoulder.

Simyaldee lifted his right mandibles and smirked. "Drop something?" The honorable human would have been proud to hear him say that.

Grimleon stood tall, a smile formed behind his helmet and he began to laugh. "You are skilled. That I cannot deny. My blood is boiling with excitement right now. Not even your father could stand toe to toe with my ancestors."

Simyaldee froze for a moment. "Tell me what you know!"

Grimleon thought. "For proving yourself this farâ€¦ I shall. Your father was killed by my ancestors. Your father was the elder in charge of the fleet that first found us for the Prophets. Myâ€¦ how shall I sayâ€¦ father's father, boarded his ship and attempted to kill him. But that is where our blood feud began. Your father did not die. He lived, escaped like a coward and hide upon our world for several weeks. Along with his honor guards, that he himself trained, they used guerilla tactics to kill as many of our clan as they could. For weeks we hunted him, learning, adapting, and waiting for him to show himself. The Hierarchs choose a very worthy prey to send to us, and that is how they gained our favor." Grimleon laughed. "They sent the best Sangheili warrior they could as bait to feed our need of conquest. From that moment on we have always been in support of the Hierarchs."

Simyaldee sat in shock. A blood feud? His father was trapped on the Brute world for weeks? The council never told him. No one told him. Why, why had he not been told?

"From that moment on, after he was caught and slowly killed, we vowed to test ourselves against the rest of the House of Yal. We thought we had done so. To bad we could not take the time to hunt your other siblings. When we learned of their deaths, we thought all of you were dead. Now, last of the House of Yal, we shall finish this feud!" Grimleon raced forward.

Foolish. Simyaldee held the upper hand, and Grimleon had to know

this. Simyaldee gripped the hammer and tossed a gravity wave at the charging Brute. Grimleon showed his agility and dodged it. Too easy, Simyaldee knew he could avoid such an obvious tactic. However, Simyaldee had to drop back when the plasma volley of a nearby Seraph swept across his path.

"What is this?" Simyaldee questioned. The Seraph descended, hovered, and began to fire at Simyaldee.

"I am no fool, Simyal!" Grimleon jumped up and climbed to the top of the seraph. "Let us see how well you fight when the fate of all of your allies is at stake." Grimleon and the Seraph soared upward, heading directly toward the gravity lift of the _Hammer of God._ The Brute jumped into the lift and was pulled upward.

Simyaldee roared into the COM. "Shut down the gravity lift!" It was too late. Grimleon rose to the top and vanished inside.

"Lieutenant, report!" Captain Monroe questioned on the COM.

"The Red Clan's Chieftain has boarded the ship. I am in pursuit. Tell the construct to seal off the storage bay!"

Siren answered. "Lieutenant! Our crew is being overwhelmed in there. You have to hurry! I sealed the door, but he isâ€¦ my godâ€¦ he's overpowering the bulkhead doors."

Captain Monroe cut in. "We have inbound phantom's headed toward our landing bays! All hands prepare to repel boarders!"

Simyaldee looked skywards as Phantom's lifted off from the forest and flew into the landing bay of the ship.

"Are the shields not up?" Simyaldee questioned as he ran toward the gravity lift.

Siren cursed over the line, "Negative. We had to shift power from the lower shield grids to compensate for the plasma bombardment on the top side. If we power up the shields near the landing bay we'll be overwhelmed by plasma fire."

Monroe sulked over the line. "Who the hell is this Brute? He outsmarted us again! Get a unit down there and slow that Cheiftain down!" Monroe shouted over the ship wide COM. Simyaldee turned it off. He needed to get up there.

He opened his COM to the ground forces. "Status!"

Palab replied. "We push back brutes. They retreat, but vehicle teams still here."

"Their infantry has not retreated; they have begun to attack the ship!" Simyaldee roared. He looked up and saw a Banshee patrol. "Banshee squadron near landing bay two. Defend against those phantoms, and I need one of you to home in on my transmission and pick me up."

A reply came over the line. "Understood." Simyaldee watched as the banshee's turned and began to attack the phantoms. They managed to shoot down one, but several more were able to slip past. As the

battle raged a Banshee dropped close to Simyaldee and he jumped onto the side wing.

"Don't stop! Get to the landing bay!" Simyaldee roared.

"Yes Lieutenant." The pilot nervously replied. They flew skyward as Simyaldee clung for life onto the side. They neared the side of the Hammer of God and flew directly into the landing bay. Inside, several dozen Elites and humans were exchanging fire with dozens of brutes. Weapon's creates exploded from stray fire, humans and elites screamed curses and insults while the brutes cried out for blood. Simyaldee could only assume that the same thing was happening throughout the other three, of the four, landing bays.

Simyaldee dropped to the deck, landed behind a pack of brutes, pulled the hammer from his back and began to swing. Three brutes tumbled lifelessly in the air as the fourth turned his spike rifle toward Simyaldee. The weapon had little effect on his fully charged shields and Simyaldee smashed the hammer upon the brute's head.

Simyaldee then turned to his side and watched as a Phantom lowered to the deck to unload another salvo of troops. He gripped the grav-hammer tightly, twisted the hilt to power it to full and then pulled it over his head. He jumped forward and hit the side of the Phantom; smashing a massive hole in the armor and forcing the machine to spin wildly in the landing bay. It careened into another Phantom as Brutes dived clear. The two massive machines impacted and slid across the bulkhead. Grenades, RPGs, and plasma volleys from the human and elite forces streaked toward the two phantoms, and within the mesh of metal and power cells something had ignited. The two phantoms exploded sending a heat wave throughout the landing bay. Every soul was tossed to the ground, or vaporized; both friend and foe. The explosion shot out of the side of the landing bay's open portal and propelled the Hammer of God slightly of kilter.

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"Siren! What in the hell was that?" Captain Monroe shouted as she gripped the command podium's control console.

"Ma'am, two brute boarding crafts were just blown apart inside the landing deck."

"I had a platoon down there." Monroe sighed.
"Casualties?"

"Analyzing." Siren paused. "The explosion killed most of the brutes in bay two. Most of our forces are still intact. Rough estimate is eight friendly killed in the blast. Two elites and six human."

"Damn." Monroe cursed under her breath. "Where's 19 when I need him?"

"Ma'am?" Siren questioned.

"Nothing." Monroe had seen action enough to know that she wasn't well prepared for boarding situations. Eric and the Black Ops had always defended her ship whenever they were boarded. She was in territory that she didn't like as she would rather defend the exterior of the

ship, and not need to worry about the possible infiltrators. "COM, where is the Lieutenant?"

"Lieutenant Simyaldee has just left bay two and is headed toward the forward storage bay."

"Lieutenant, copy?" Monroe shouted into the COM.

"Not now!" Simyaldee shot back.

"â€¦ right." Monroe sighed. At least she knew Simyaldee was doing his best to defend the ship, but still, it was hard to assess the situation if he wasn't communicating.

Monroe leveled her eyes and brushed the sweat from her brow. "Banshee patrol, keep those Seraph's away from the ship as best as possible. Ground unit, copy?"

"Me copy." Palab shouted into the COM.

"Status."

"Brutes regrouping. Trying to get to ship gravity lift. Some already on phantoms going to ship landing bay. Me troops guard main gravity lift."

"Understood." Monroe thought for a moment. "How many of the Mirratord Elites are with Simyaldee?"

"Me not think any." Palab stuttered. An Explosion echoed in his COM and the grunt king shouted orders to his unit, but came back to the COM. "Lieutenant leave Mirratord with me."

"Then he's alone?" Monroe questioned to herself. "Siren, who is this Chieftain? What makes him so special? The brutes have never put up an offensive thisâ€¦ tactical. Based on previous records on Earth, they mostly use force to overwhelm."

"Unknown. Judging by his color, size and his armor classâ€¦ I would say he is a Jiralhanae Warhammer."

"A what?" Monroe questioned. But her eyes happened to notice that every Elite on the command deck looked concerned.

Siren commented quickly. "I just performed a Jiralhanae command structure check. The Brute called a Warhammer is similar to the Supreme Commander of a fleet. However, unlike the typical Covenant structure, a brute of this degree is only permitted when he has â€¦" Siren paused as she attempted to brace the Captain. "Captain, he's skilled. Highly skilled. I recommend we go to immediate lockdown. But that will only slow him down. He's already broken through two of my bulkhead locks."

"How?"

"He tore a hole in them." Siren commented.

"Can you vent the atmosphere in his section?"

"Negative. His helmet has an air tight seal, and most of the sections

he has entered have some of our troops in them."

"Options for stopping him?" The Captain questioned.

Siren coldly replied. "Ma'am, he is a Brute Warhammer, and if he lives up to the rank, then he alone could possibly overtake this ship. My only recommendation would be to sacrifice a portion of the ship."

Monroe folded her arms in thought. "A Brute Spartan."

"Yes ma'am. That would be the best way to see it."

"What about the Mirratord?" Monroe asked, almost hopping for a good answer.

"At presentâ€¦ Simyaldee is our only hope. None of the other Mirratord are aboard the ship."

Captain Monroe bit down on her thumb, nervously gnawing at the nail, and then looked at the forward view screen. The banshee patrols were doing an okay job at stopping the brutes from dropping jammers on them, but occasionally one would drop through.

Siren barked over the line. "Captainâ€¦ Lord Hood! It's Lord Hood on the COM!" The human command crew all cheered in excitement.

"Open the channel!" Monroe eagerly ordered. It had been nearly a week since anyone had heard from Hood, and everyone feared the worst.

The COM burst open. _"I repeat! All forces capable, all ships, all ground units, all Navy, transport or other, Rally on Mombasa! We must stop Truth! The Ark has been completely uncovered and its primary systems are activating!"_

Siren cut in. "That was it, Ma'am. I lost the channel."

Captain Monroe leaned forward over the console, her hands planted firmly on the alien metal. "Do we abandon Eden? What about the Civilians? We can't just leave, but if we don't go and helpâ€¦ Truth may win."

****To be continuedâ€¦****

21. Zero Hour

- - - SPOILER WARNING - - - This Chapter contains possible Halo 3 plot points that may ruin the experience of the Halo 3 game. While this story does not follow the Master Chief and Cortana, their actions are directly related to the events that transpire in this story. ****

_You have been warned.**

> soulguard_**

**> **

*** * ***

><p>Level 21: Zero Hour

Hammer of God
> HumanSangheili controlled ship

Camp Eden

The blood splattered gravity hammer fell to the deck with a loud metallic thud. Simyaldee had expended its power completely on the few dozen brutes that lined the hall toward the last reported location of Grimleon. The Gravity Hammer buzzed and sparked as smoke escaped from it and Simyaldee left it lifeless in the hallway; along with the bloody corpses of the thirty plus brutes that had foolishly decided to fight him.

Simyaldee raced ahead, his nostrils flaring as Grimleon's familiar smell burned into him. He was close, but still far away. Grimleon was by far the most skilled opponent to ever cross his path, and Simyaldee was not going to let the Brute take control of this ship.

Simyaldee ran along the corridor and saw that another group of brutes were completely blocking his path, and he was forced to fight them. Grimleon's stench was growing weaker, and that meant that he was getting further away; deeper into the ship. After a few moments of fighting there were more dead brutes and more wasted time.

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Grimleon's massive hulk trotted deeper into the corridor. His golden armor, marked with the bloody print of his clan, was dusty from combat in the hot sands below the ship, but now he was in striking range of dealing a critical blow to the human defenses. But even with this new found attack, his focus was still on Simyaldee. He wanted to finally be rid of the last Elite in the House of Yal. His clan had sworn over the course of many generations to kill them all, but the false peace between the brutes and elites hindered his quest and he was not aware that one last child of Yal still existed.

And a Mirrator warrior, no less.

"Grimleon." The speaker in the corridor echoed. Grimleon paused, and so did his few brute escorts. The thick bulkhead door in front of closed shut, and soon after the door behind did the same. Trapped. Grimleon's eyes bounced from side to side, looking about the purple and steel of the hall.

The voice added. "That is your name, is it not?"

"Who speaks it?" Grimleon snarled. He stepped forward, beyond the pack at his side. A hologram emerged before him glowing from the lights of the hall. It was a human female, floating majestically along an unseen wind. The pack of brutes at his aid stepped forward, snarling as they fired at the humanoid image. Their weapons passed through the image as Siren returned a simple smile.

Grimleon roared his disapproval, "Hold you fire!" He pushed one of the brutes to the side, knocking him down and then stepped toward Siren's glow. "A construct."

"My name is Siren." She said with down cast eyes. "I have a

proposition for you. One that may gain you great favor with your leader; Truth." Siren extended her hand and in it she formed the image of a pink crystal. "Truth is searching for a way to power the Arkâ€¦ this is it."

Grimleon looked around, cautiously aware that human AI's were not trust worthy. "Why would you give me this? Why should I believe you?"

"This Luminous Key is the Path of Reclamation. It will allow Truth to activate the Ark. Truth will get what he wants, and so will I."

"I am not here for the Prophet's wishes, construct!" Grimleon snarled. "I am here to destroy the last of the House of Yal!"

Siren raised her eyes. "I have let you live so that you can do my will." The room began to hum as the air began to compress. Oxygen vents opened to full as the brutes all began to crumble in pain. Grimleon sealed his helmet and watched as his pack crumbled. "They will die approximately twenty seconds before you. Your armor's environmental lock down cannot protect you from the amount of pressure I can produce within this corridor." Siren watched as one Brute's armor collapsed around his chest and blood began to spit from his eyes. "Tick Tockâ€¦"

Grimleon roared. "Very well construct! End this!" The hum faded and the immense atmospheric pressure faded.

Siren smiled. "Excellent. I did not believe you would allow yourself to die in such a dishonorable manor. Now, go to the nearest data port and extract the crystal's core data and take it to Truth."

The bulkhead door behind the group of dazed brutes began to thump. Siren raised her head and smirked. "Simyaldee is quite efficient. That is him and he is telling me to open the door. However, you must give this to Truth before your blood feud can continue."

Grimleon roared his protest snarling as he gripped the nearest data port and pulled out the new data crystal. "He is here. So close I can taste his blood within my jowls, but you have hindered my plans construct, so defeating him now is obsolete."

Siren chuckled. "So you are admitting that you cannot best him?"

"I admit his worthiness in combat, and I will have his head. But for now, I will uphold your wishes. However, what will you offer meâ€¦ other than life?"

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Simyaldee kicked the door once again. "Siren! Let me kill him!"

"No Lieutenant. As I said, I can deal with this. I have him trapped andâ€¦ damn!" Siren shouted. "He broke through another bulkhead. He's doubling back to a nearby gangplank."

"What?" Simyaldee roared. "Let me after him! Open the door!" The door slowly hissed open as Simyaldee ducked under it and gave chase. He turned down the blown wall that Grimleon had made and followed the new course after the brute. Simyaldee pulled his blades from his hip

and jumped into the hallway which lead to an open portal, and beyond that was sunlight. With his incredible land speed Simyaldee sprinted down the access gangplank and watched as two brutes turned toward him. He cut the first one down and kicked the other from his path. He then spun and beheaded the beast. But the time it took for Simyaldee to kill the two beasts cost him.

Simyaldee stood at the end of the gangplank and watched as a phantom soared free from the ship. "Siren, shoot him down!"

"I cannot, Lieutenant. None of the plasma turrets are currently angled to his position. He will be out of range before I can fire."

Simyaldee slammed his fist against the wall and snarled a deep feverish growl.

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Captain Monroe sighed deeply as she watched the last Seraph be shot from the sky. She leaned forward and rubbed the sweat from her brow. "It's not over yet. Siren, report on the boarding party."

"Ma'am. Only a few brutes remain, and fire teams are currently hunting them down. We should be done shortly."

"What about that Warhammer?" Captain Monroe questioned.

"He escaped." Siren stated.

Monroe exhaled. "At least he's off the ship. Lieutenant Simyaldee, report."

The COM buzzed on the deck. "I will assist in the additional clean up of the Brutes that are still on board. Sergeant Palab can handle the ground troops with the rest of the Mirratord."

"Actually, Simyaldee, I need to speak with you. Lord Hood is rallying the last remnant of the fleet to New Mombasa and â€¦ I request your console."

"Very well, Captain. I shall arrive momentarily."

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Siren slipped within her digital domain. Here she could think without much interference. She looked around her empty space and blinked away the cold darkness of cyberspace. In its place stood a familiar world she created. Siren sat upon a patch of grass and watched as the sky opened before her. A vast emptiness shined from the heavens as a bubble of folded space appeared in the atmosphere.

"Thank you for showing me this, Cortana." She said aloud. "Now I understand. We must seek the Pathâ€¦ or the world will end." The folded space glowed a brilliant blue and continued to grow smaller and smaller. "The path will open just as before, but this time, Eric will do his part and follow the Path. I guess this means the Keeper was right, but Eric will not simply let humanity be destroyed. Not this time. Not if I have anything to say about it."

Siren continued to watch as human ships followed covenant ships into the space fold bubble. And soon the virtual world she created began to grow green and misty with a sickening dark green. Tentacles began to spring up from the world reaching out to the sky. It was a flood form, a massive Gravemind consuming the world and all of life. But then, in the depths of space, there was a bright flash. She watched as a wave of all consuming power expanded and eventually washed over the earth erasing everything in its path. The wave brushed through Siren and she stood as the Earth died.

She blinked and everything was back to normal within her digital realm.

"Eric, we cannot let the world end."

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Captain Monroe descended to the base of the ramp as Simyaldee walked onto the command deck. She glared at him in shock as dried blood covered his dented armor. It was the blood of the numerous enemies he had slain in the last few minutes of battle. Simyaldee had been through a great deal and now she understood why he was so aggressive toward her on the radio; Simyaldee was a warrior and his duty was to fight. It was a bad idea to try and talk to a trained killer that was in the midst of combat.

"Lieutenant, Lord Hood was finally able to breach Truth's jamming waves. He is pushing all of the troops toward New Mombasa. We have enough firepower on this ship to do a sizeable amount of damage, butâ€¦"

Simyaldee cut off her statement, "We cannot leave the human civilians unguarded. You wish for me to decide?"

"No. It isn't that simple. I must obey my orders, but I was hoping that maybe you would remain."

"And miss my chance to kill Truth?" Simyaldee suddenly questioned. His tone was surprisingly feral. "In all of my battles and conquests I have only done what was ordered of me, but now, with the end so near, I will not-can not, sit by and protect your civilians."

"Lieutenant, there are still Brute patrols roaming the country side and if we leaveâ€¦"

"That decision is between you and your leaders. Forgive my rudeness, Captain, but no. I can not stay." Simyaldee turned and began to walk off the command deck. He powered on his COM. "Sergeant Palab, report."

"Brutes thin. Me and Mirrator keep them contained. Me finish with ground forces and come to ship to help."

"No. Stay at your position. I will deal with the ship. When we are done we are going after that Jiralhanae Chieftain"

Without warning, Simyaldee's COM switched frequencies. "_â€¦|. Lieutenant, do you copy?_" A male elite voice sounded.

"Yesâ€¦ high elder is that you?"

"_Simyalâ€¦ it has been some time."_

"Yes elder, it has. What are you doing back on Earth?"

"_We have not yet arrived on Earth, but soon we shall. We have returned with a fleet to assist in defeating Truth. But before that, there is someone whom you must speak. Our Queen lives." _

"Queen?" Simyaldee questioned. But like a bolt of lightning he instantly recalled the memories of a nearly forgotten era. He recalled the time that ushered in his Mirratord loyalties.

A female voice spoke on his COM. "_Simyal. We have returned from the very edge of space. It brings me great joy to know that you have survived after all of these years." _

"Vasmeolaâ€¦" Simyaldee paused at the door of the command deck and glared into nothingness as he let the sound of his lost mate whisper into his ears.

"_The High Elder tells me that you are quite the warrior now, far from what you were during your initial training."_

"My Queen, it is wonderful to hear your voiceâ€¦ to know that you are still aliveâ€¦ after all this time, I had thoughtâ€¦"

"_Simyal, I am too stubborn for the prophets to kill me."_ She softly chuckled. "_I will ask that you notify any elders and all of your soldiers of my soon arrival."_

"My Queen, Earth is a war zone. It is much too dangerous for you to come."

"_I give the orders, Simyal. And I am not coming alone."_

Simyaldee smirked as his heart released more than one hundred years of pain. He took a deep breath, and it felt as though he had not breathed life since the day she left his side. "As you wish, my Queen."

Simyaldee turned back to Captain Monroe. "Captain, there has been a change in plans."

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Grimleon zipped across the savannah as his phantom roared over battlefields and thunderous explosions. The ship's engines hummed loudly as he entered the anti-aircraft area of the Covenant defense zone around the Ark structure. Several Covenant banshee's hummed to the phantom's side, ready to shoot him down at a moments notice.

"This is Grimleon of the Red Clan, let me pass."

The radio vibrated. "Mighty Warhammer, you have returned!" A brute cheered over the line. "We read you loud and clear. The AA turrets will cease fire until you pass."

"Good," Grimleon replied, "tell the Hierarch that I am on my way."

The phantom sped over the continent as several human ships were shot down from his path by the Covenant AA turrets and banshee interceptors, but Grimleon was able to fly safely through. He lowered the ship and sped toward the massive Forerunner ship at the center of what appeared to be a gigantic metal dome deep beneath the surface of the human world.

"The Ark?" Grimleon questioned. He continued on his course until he docked with the forerunner ship, quickly exited the phantom, and made his way deeper into the forerunner structure known as the Ark.

After nearly a half an hour of running he raced to Truth's side. A group of Truth's honor guards approached and stood between Grimleon and Truth. They snarled at his approach and made ready to attack. But as Grimleon stalked closer, the brutes nervously stepped back, fearful of the mighty Warhammer's prior deeds.

Truth said, "Tell me why I should spare you for your treachery?"

Grimleon smiled. "Spare me your idle threats. These mindless fools are already aware that I could kill them without much folly. For the sake of our race however, I'll give them no quarrel. But the Red Clan has no equal." Grimleon held up the crystal and to everyone's surprise Truth floated forward, past his honor guards, and reached out with his frail hands. "And now you see why you should 'spare' me."

"Is that the Key?"

"It is." Grimleon smirked.

"How were you able to find this?"

"Does it matter?"

"I suppose it does not." Truth held the Key tightly and the pink crystal shard of data shifted shape into a long sliver that resembled a key with four blades. He floated toward the central control and quickly inserted it. "By the Gods, work!"

There was a brilliant light as the key turned on its own and sent a pulse of blue lights around the room. The central terminal glowed as it lowered into the floor and Truth lifted his hands in gratitude. "Now, the Path will open." He turned to Grimleon. "You have done well, my Warhammer. I beg of you to lead my forces to the other side."

"I have never cared for you Gods. I will follow my own Path and kill the last of the House of Yal."

Truth nodded in gratitude. "Soon the Ark ship, which was designed to power this structure, will reach full power and the Path will be open. If you stay, you will be left behind."

Grimleon smirked. "You forget Hierarch, I know your deeds and your true intent. Destroy the universe. Do as you will. I am too old and I

have seen too much to care. Yet if you do win in your crusade, I ask but one thing. Grant my race a place in your domain."

Truth rubbed the stubble under his chin and averted his eyes. "That is how I have always seen it. I assure you, that this is how it shall be. I am the voice of the Covenant, and therefore I say it shall be so. You have my word on this, my mighty Warhammer."

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Ark Excavation site // Mombasa observatory
> ONI Facility Bravo A-11092G: The Gatekeeper<p>

The whirl of hydraulics filled the air as Lieutenant Eric Raynord and his second in Command, Field Commission Senior Chief Petty Officer Mathew Collins, sat upon the elevator leading to the upper ground level of the Gatekeeper Facility. Together, Black Ops 19 and 08 had just spent one hour drilling each other on the ins and outs of the new SPI combat suits. Mathew and Eric had much to be thankful for, and the slight modifications that Rose had done were flawlessly integrated. Rose truly was a master of her trade.

Beside Eric and Mathew were several ONI brass members who would see to the air support being organized by Lord Hood, but for now this was Eric's operation. Sitting behind the ONI Brass was a row of warthogs and Mongoose ATVs. The large freight elevator had a camouflage topside but Eric knew that when the camouflage parted, the Covenant would be aware of their location.

A hiss of compressed hydraulics echoed above the elevator as leaves began to fall from the surface. Rain pools spilled inside the splitting roof overhead as sunlight streamed inside. The storm lingered in the distance, but the rain had subsided for now. A good sign. The fake roof continued to part and with it, Eric and Mathew could see the numerous explosions in the sky as Covenant AA guns made short work of Longswords, hornets and the unlucky pelican's that flew in too close.

Vice Admiral Parangosky stepped forward to Eric's side. "You should be able to reach Lord Hood, patch me through."

Eric nodded. "Lord Hood, please respond."

Eric's COM vibrated. "_Black Ops 19, it is about damn time you came out of the ground."_

"Forgive my delay, sir." Eric replied. "I have Vice Admiral Parangosky on the two way."

"_Speak."_ Hood sighed.

Parangosky stepped forward, leaning closer to Eric's helmet. "Lord Hood," She began. "ONI Facility Bravo A is ready to lend its support. We have made full arrangements."

"_You are about twenty minutes too late Vice Admiral. I have already given the go for an attack order, but none the less we can use your assistance."_

Eric chimed in. "Can you fill us in Sir?"

"_Sierra 117 is currently knocking out AA guns along the Ark's edge. He's making a hole so that my ships can punch through. The Arbiter is on his way to assist him."_

Eric questioned the call sign Sierra 117, S-117, S must mean Spartan. Lord Hood was talking about the Master Chief. "What of Eden, Sir?" Eric questioned.

"_Unknown. Communications with Eden are sporadic at best. There's still a tight Covenant defensive there, and I assume it has something to do with the Tree of Life. Truth is still trying to get to it, or destroy it. Those ONI spooks at your side could probably tell you more than I can."_

Admiral Parangosky lowered her head at the comment.

Hood continued. "_For now, Sierra 117 is pushing through, however, ONI Facility Bravo A puts you close."_

"Sir, with all the commotion happening with Sierra 117, Tangos will be watching him closely. My platoon is ready to backdoor them."

"_We don't know what's down there son." Hood replied. "The Ark has been completely sealed off to our forces. That were stationed there."_

"Sir, if Sierra 117 can not complete his mission, someone has to get in there and shut Truth down from the inside." Eric commented as the elevator reached the top. In front of him stood forty strong soldiers, Gridolee, a handful of grunts, and three Spartan IIIs wearing modified SPI armor.

Hood sighed heavily, "_You're right, 19. But if we break throughâ€¦"_

"Sir, we know the risks."

"_You have a green light. Good luck Black Ops."_ Hood ended the transmission.

Parangosky whispered, "Lord Hood is right about this, 19. ONI lost contact with all of its Ark support teams once Truth went inside. We had nearly three hundred personnel studying it when he landed. All are assumed KIA."

Eric turned to the Platoon as Vice Admiral Parangosky motioned toward a Pelican. Every eye in the Platoon turned to the Black armor clad Lieutenant. "Listen up! Objective one is to clear a path for Doctor Halsey's ship. Objective two is to breach the Ark and get as close to Truth as possible. Pelican's one through four, will take point until the ship reaches escape velocity." Eric turned and nodded briefly to Mathew.

Mathew stepped forward. "Move like you have a purpose!"

The platoon dispersed as Eric shouldered an RPG and affixed an assault rifle to his back. His HUD flashed with four green markers which signaled the four fire team leaders of the platoon. "Gridolee, check." A green light flashed. "G009, check." Another green light

flashed corresponding to Greg the Spartan III. "G017, check." Kate's light flashed on his HUD. "G021, check." Dave's light flashed red. There was a problem.

"19, I have a situation. Someone is trying stop Doctor Halsey from loading into the escape vehicle." Dave radioed.

Eric turned to Mathew. "Understood, I'm on my way." He closed the channel. "Finish prepping the Platoon."

"Roger that." Mathew barked. "I hope you are going to make a habit of running to the rescue everytime there is one?"

Eric didn't answer his longtime friend. With the added speed of his SPI armor, Eric sprinted across the elevator and toward the launch site for the small Corvette cruiser docked just under the northeast sector of the Gatekeeper facility. He sprinted through the tree lines, passing marines and ODSs as they loaded their gear and then pushed through the door to the ship. As he turned a corner he froze as he watched Spartan 087 level her battle rifle at a nearby civilian science officer. Eric recognized her immediately.

Doctor Halsey walked closer to her subordinate. "Anne, step aside. Time is critical."

Anne backed away from Kelly's massive frame, but kept her small pistol aimed at Catherine. "No! No! I can't stay here! You! you can't leave me here to die!"

"Anne, I told you." Halsey said. "The others were mistaken. The Flood infection isn't why the Ark is counting down. You will not become a monster. It is a power build up. Truth does not have the Ark Key to power the subsystems, so he is attempting to build power remotely. The Path of Reclamation is a means of stopping the flood. The countdown simply means that the Ark is preparing to fire. We will stop truth before the time expires."

"In response to the flood spores, the Ark's defenses will initiate!" Anne screamed. "You said so yourself! It is a weapon!"

"Anne! we have time. You are not infected."

"Take me with you!" Anne screamed as she pointed the gun to her own head. Tears swelled in her eyes. "I don't want to die like this."

Eric opened a closed line to Kelly. "Take the shot. Aim for her pistol."

"Risky." Kelly replied.

"This isn't a threat. She'll do it. You know it, and I know it." Eric bitterly replied. "She would rather kill herself then be left behind. Disarm her or she's going to kill herself."

Kelly leveled her rifle, held her breath and tapped the trigger. A successive burst of three bullets split the air as Anne's pistol spun from her hand. Anne cried out as the gun flipped upward from the first two bullets, but the last round cleanly cut through her palm. Blood splattered the wall at her side as Eric sprinted past Kelly and

grabbed Anne as she tumbled.

"Medic!" Eric gave a shout. "Anne, you're okay. A little morphine and you'll never know what hit you." A marine field medic raced to the scene and they carried Anne out of the way. Eric turned to Kelly and Doctor Halsey. "Go and save the Universe."

Doctor Halsey walked into the ship and Kelly followed closely behind. She turned and gave Eric a firm Salute. Eric formally replied.

Kelly then said on a closed channel. "It's been an honor, 19."

"The honor was all mine, 087. Next time we meet, I'll buy."

"I'll hold you to it. Good luck Spartan." Kelly closed the door to the ship and as it began to slide past Kelly's face, she took two fingers and made a smile across her helmet where her mouth was located. "Tell Rose, thanks for everything."

Eric nodded in response as the door closed. He then turned to Dave G021, "Break off your fire team and prep for departure."

"Yes sir." Dave replied.

Eric quickly raced back to his post and watched as four brute phantoms floated into the area. As expected the Gatekeeper facility location was no longer a secret with all of the movement, weapons, and radio chatter between marines. Anyone with a decent pair of eyes could spot the massive metallic elevator in the center of the thick pack of trees.

A mole on the distant horizon commented on the radio exactly what Eric was seeing. "Incoming Tangos! Four Phantom's on quick decent!"

Eric opened a wide COM. "Pelican's and hornets, get up there and clear the path. Ground forces break off to your assigned position. Team leaders, you have your orders."

Four green lights winked on Eric's HUD as the first Objective began.

To be continuedâ€|

* * *

>Notes: It was a bit short this time, but mainly I wanted to setup the focus for the next two, and last, levels of the trilogy. Expect total insanity to follow. And as always thanks for reading.
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22. The way the world endsâ€|

Level 22: The way the world endsâ€|

Cortana whispered. "I chose him. But you knew that. You can see it in my data string. Everything in my existence, you have already seen. Do you thinkâ€| no, wrong way of phrasing it. Will he come for me?"

Siren sat opposite of Cortana and smiled. "He will come this time. The present is different. We have made the right choices. He will not abandon you."

Cortana lowered her eyes. "I don't know how much longer I can hold on."

"You've come this far. You can go further."

"I was never human." Cortana moaned. "Everything that I am is nothing but stolen memories and strings of code. You, Siren, had a life once. You know what its like to live."

"To love." Siren added.

"The Chiefâ€¦ John." Cortana smiled. "It's not that I love him. He is my best friend. I've seen his heart, his mind, felt his pain and his loss. He is my best friend, my only friend, and Iâ€¦."

"Cortana!" Siren shouted as she reached out to the image. Siren tracked the data transmission from High Charity and watched as it vanished into the fold of space and time. "Cortana. Good luck. I can't come with you this time. That was the mistake we've always made. This time, we must work separately."

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Ark Excavation site // Mombasa observatory
> ONI Facility Bravo A-11092G: The Gatekeeper<p>

"Report!" Eric shouted over the COM. He took a knee near a large rock and watched as several Banshees and hornets danced around each other overhead. Plasma and artillery were swapping back and forth and the eventual explosion of the lesser skilled pilot echoed in the distance.

Kate G017 replied back. "Infantry is inbound. Jackal's up front followed by grunts and brutes. My team is being cut down. I'm trying to pull them backâ€¦" An explosion sounded on the line. "â€¦ too many of them! I can't keep the team together!"

Eric checked his HUD and displaced a map of the terrain. Kate's squad was protecting the entrance to the facility. Dave G021 and Greg G009 were defending the launch bay and too far to get into position to assist Kate. Eric had to think. He was the closest to aid Kate, but once Doctor Halsey's ship took off he needed to lead the assault into the Ark.

Eric tapped Mathew on the shoulder. "I'm going to help G017. You lead the charge inside the Ark if I'm not back in time."

"19, you sure?" Mathew replied. "What about Gridolee?"

Eric thought for a moment and the map reappeared on his HUD. No, Gridolee and the grunts were still providing AA cover for the ONI Brass and their escaping Pelicans. "No, I'm the only one. You know the call." Eric turned and sprinted up the makeshift stair well of rocks and crates to the facility entrance level. He cut through the hallways as fast as he could, passing the second platoon that would

aid in defending the base if the brutes got in. He neared the main access stairwell and climbed. The SPI armor was responding magnificently to his movements, carrying him faster than twice his normal pace.

As he neared the top of the stairs he could hear the exchange of fire from Kate's Fire Team and Eric flipped his rifle's safety off. He pulled the stock to his right shoulder and checked his motion tracker before he opened the door. Only two friendlies were moving on the other side. He opened the door, and instantly powered on his forward shield generator. A silver glow hovered over his chest, stomach, groin, neck, thigh and head. He gripped his rifle with his left hand and his left forearm also glowed silver. It was a near perfect forward shield for a firefight, as the openings in the shields were minimal to enemy fire, but a well placed grenade would end it instantly. Eric knelt low, spun toward the enemy fire and opened up with his assault rifle. Three jackals were caught off guard from the spray as grunts panicked in the wake. Blue grenades flared in their hands as Kate ran up to Eric's side. With a Battle Rifle in hand she put down the grunts before they could toss the plasma grenades. The loose and charging plasmas flared and exploded in the pack of nine brutes. Some died in the explosion while others merely growled in protest.

"Sir!" Kate shouted. "What are you doing here? Why didn't you send support?"

"I am your support, rookie." Eric calmly shot back as he duck walked while firing. He slipped into cover and reloaded his rifle. Eric had a quick thought of Melanie and how she would have made a silly comment in the heat of battle in order to ease the tension, but no such comment came.

Kate replied, "But Sir, you're an officerâ€¦ you shouldn't be exposing yourself to enemy fire unless absolutely necessary." Kate sounded off the practical military structure.

"Details, details." Eric added in his best attempt at mocking something Melanie would say. Eric looked around the small defensible position that Kate and her last contingent of marines had secured, and he noticed that the Brutes had penetrated a nature funnel caused by the rock formation beyond the ridge. Eric lowered his rifle in exchange for his RPG. He stood and climbed the metal crate he was positioned behind, and fired into the pack of enraged brutes. Their mutilated carcasses littered the floor around them. Eric knelt back behind cover and reloaded the RPG and switched to his rifle. "That should hold them for a minute. Regroup your fire team and focus on that bottleneck. You can't miss obvious tactical advantages like that. Don't let the brutes pass."

"Yes sir." Kate began to push supply crates and radioed for more troops to be sent to her six. The door to the launch deck of the Gatekeeper facility parted and a dozen marines filed in.

Eric opened a closed channel to Kate and reminded her, "Think ahead, 17. Anticipate the enemy and then think of what they might do to beat your best scenario."

"Sir?" Kate stuttered. "I think I understand."

"17, you are in the Black Ops now. I don't want you thinking like a mere piece of cannon fodder. Use that brain of yours! I have to get back. Defend this position."

"Understood 19." Kate shot back. She turned to her new marine compliment and looked around the facility entrance. Trees and crates were everywhere. Foxholes made it almost impossible to establish a good offensive against the entrance. Eric was right, and Kate quickly recognized her error. She wasn't using the environment the way Mathew had showed her during the game of King of the Hill. The entire area was a defendable fortress. "Setup turrets and displace trip mines near those tree lines!" She shouted to the marines. "I want turrets in the foxholes and make sure you all have a supply of bubble shields." She swallowed the painful memory of all the troops she allowed to die during the first assault. She wasn't thinking and it cost her a great deal of human life.

Eric was racing back to the breach point and was listening in on the numerous chatters of the squads. He had singled out Kate and was listening closely to her orders. As a platoon El Tee, he could listen in on any open communication amongst the squads under his command. Thank goodness for that, because it allowed him to pick up the sound of panic in Greg 009's voice. The Spartan IIIs weren't fairing too well in the Guerilla War department.

Kimberly Peters had trained the Black Ops to be thinkers, deadly, silent, and experts in recon and surveillance. Eric recalled how many times he and the rest of the Black Ops had been separated from the squad and forced to complete their missions solo. One Black Ops was as deadly as an entire platoon, simply because the Black Ops were masters of Guerilla and Terrorists tactics behind enemy lines.

The Spartan IIIs were trained to be cannon fodder; typical resources thrown at an enemy like munitions rounds. It must have been Ackerson's belief that if he had enough IIIs he could throw them at the Covenant and the Covenant would retreat. A waste of skillful soldiers.

"09, report." Eric ordered.

"Brutesâ€¦ flying brutes inbound at the elevator!" Greg radioed back.

Eric switched channels. "Moles, do you see inbound heavy weapons?"

"Uhhâ€¦ Roger that El Tee! Six Tango heavies inbound on phantom carriers!"

Eric switched back to Greg. "Listen to me, 09. You have to hold off those Brutes. They are trying to clear a landing area for their inbound heavy weapons. Keep your head level, displace your fire team and take them out."

"I'll try sirâ€¦" Greg started to say, but Eric quickly cut him off.

"You will not TRY, soldier. You WILL hold off that Brute wave." Eric switched. "Gridolee, inbound Heavy weapons. Topside Moles will give you a target vector."

"Understood honorable one."

Eric switched again. "Doctor tell me you are ready for lift off."

Catherine Halsey replied back on the line. "Engines are now at 95, Eric. They need to be at full power in order for me to go to slip space before I hit orbit. Any later than thatâ€¦"

Eric interrupted. "and you'll be shot down. I understand. How long before you can depart?"

"Six minutes to spin up the Shaw-Fuji light drive." She replied. "When they are ready, we can launch."

"Understood ma'am." Eric stopped as he reached Mathew's side. "Six minutes."

"Do we always have to cut it close?" Mathew sighed.

"That's what we do." Eric huffed. He then opened his wide COM. "Report."

"Heavy infiltration team topside." Kate radioed back. "We are holding."

"Launch deck is clear." Dave sounded off.

"Elevator still under heavy fire from multiple Tangos." Greg added. "They are wearing jump jets of some kind. We CAN hold them off, 19."

"Enemy heavy weapons are holding just beyond weapons range." Gridolee commented on the line. "I suspect they are waiting for the ground troops to infiltrate and take out our Anti Air guns."

Eric shot back to everyone. "We need to hold for four minutes, and then we can let the Airforce scare the hell out of the brutes."

Four green lights displayed on Eric's HUD, and then he began the hard part; waiting. He pulled up his HUD terrain map and rolled through the various data layouts, field locations of troops, and enemy Tango's. Rose had set up both Eric and Mathew's SPI armor with security feeds of the Gatekeeper facility. This allowed Eric to see anyone that was in the facility on a cross section floor map. He could see yellow allies facing off against red covenant troops, and green dots signaled a COM burst in which he could instantly access. He flipped the map from section to section, monitoring every encounter, gave instructions and repositioned groups. The SPI armor gave him more resources than the Modified ODS armor could, and twice the protection. With a thought, he could contact Gridolee and order him to displace his troops and guns, or contact an SIII and tell them to fall back or advance to another section. He was in complete control of his Platoon in a way he could only dream of.

After a few moments Eric's COM blurted, "Shaw-Fuji light drive is hot. We are ready to exit." Catherine radioed.

Eric lit his wide COM. "All forces, push back the brutes as best you

can. Hornet and Pelican escorts, prepare to defend the ship!"

The base began to rumble beneath as the relatively small UNSC ship pushed its engines and began to motion out of the Gatekeeper facility. The ramp doors parted, revealing the open sky as Catherine throttled to full power. "Kelly, weapons ready."

"Yes ma'am." Kelly replied as she powered up the forward guns. The sky opened in front of the ship as Gridolee's AA guns began to spray about at anything that would attempt to come close to the ship. Explosions marked the sky, banshees ignited in flames, seraphs split in two, and phantoms imploded. The ship successfully cleared the ramp and Catherine accelerated the main engine and powered off the Artificial Gravity field. A contrail of smoke followed the ship as it climbed upward. The hornet escorts gave up their guard as they could no longer keep up, but the pelicans continued to pursue until the ship was clear of brute seraph patrols.

"Doctor Halsey." Lord Hood radioed. "I have you on NAV-SAT. You are clear for Light Drive."

"Understood." Catherine replied.

"Good luck." He commented. The small ship created a violent tear in subspace as it rocketed out of the atmosphere. An explosion of subspace parted the sky and the ship slipped through as it closed. Kelly and Doctor Halsey were off to find out what happened to Blue team on the classified world called Onyx.

Eric lowered his head. "All troops rally to fall back positions. Facility defense force you are go for active defense."

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Eric's message echoed in the small officer's lounge in the heart of the Gatekeeper Facility. Wesley Williams, the ONI spook that had been following Eric since they were both stationed at the New Mombasa facility, sat at his desk and slowly messaged his eyes. He pulled his pistol from its holster and examined the weapon for a moment before he stood from his desk. He pressed a red alert button and painfully lowered his eyes. Across from him was the unnamed spook that had executed Major Rawlings. "Your orders?" Wesley stated without looking at the man.

"See a brute," the man said as he strapped on his ODST armor, "then kill it. Nothing gets passed level 2."

- - - - -

Eric opened his COM and contacted Lord Hood. "Sir, we are clear to infiltrate."

"Stand bye." Lord Hood replied. There was a momentary pause and then finally Hood came back on the line, except his communication was set to a wide frequency. _"All ships fire at will!" _

Eric turned and looked at Mathew. "You copy that?"

"Yes sir, we all did." Mathew nodded. "Clearly wide bandâ€¦ what the hell happened?"

"Gridolee check?" Eric questioned.

"The human fleet is attacking Truth's ships." Gridolee stated as he stood topside and peered over the edge of the massive gorge overlooking the Ark.

"The Master Chief did it!" A marine shouted. Roars of applause and cheers echoed about the numerous marines and ONI personnel waiting behind Eric and Mathew.

"Wait... something is happeningâ€¦" Gridolee added over the COM. "The Arkâ€¦ isâ€¦" The line went flat and static washed through the COM.

"Lieutenant!" Eric shouted. "Gridolee!" The ONI Facility rumbled as loud metallic grinds filled the air. It was coming from everywhere, yet Eric had the feeling that it was coming from the Ark.

"All COMs are down sir." A marine shouted. The vibrations intensified and then suddenly stopped.

"Anyone topside?"

"I am here, honorable one." Gridolee returned on the line.

Eric exhaled in relief. "Report."

"Iâ€¦ I do not know what has happened. Truth's ship is leaving, it is entering a â€¦ I do not know what it is. His fleet is following. I believe it is some form of subspace rift."

"Did the Ark fire?" Eric questioned.

"Yes." Gridolee replied.

Greg 09 radioed, "Sir, all Tango's are retreating! They're pulling back!"

Eric tapped Gridolee's COM. "Confirm?"

"Yes." Gridolee simply added. He was clearly stunned by something. "Phantom's are withdrawing, and the Brutes areâ€¦ leaving."

Eric's wideband COM cut in. "_What did Truth just do? Did he activate the rings?" _Lord Hood coughed over the wide band COM.

"_No sirâ€¦" _Came an unfamiliar female voice. "_But he certainly did something." _

"_Evacuate wounded and regroup. Wherever truth wentâ€¦" _Hood continued but a mole cut across his transmission.

"_Sir, new contact slipping in." _

The female voice replied over the wide band COM. "_The Floodâ€¦ its spreading all over the city." _Eric clinched his fist, wanting to comment on the line, but he didn't want to interrupt.

"_How do we contain it?" _Hood replied.

The woman on the opposite end of the wide channel burst answered, _"Find the crashed ship, overload its engine core. We either destroy this city, or we risk losing the entire planet."_ Eric noticed that whoever she was she knew what the Flood were capable of.

Hood answered. _"Do it."_ The wide band frequency terminated and Hood switched back to Eric's channel. "Black Ops, were you monitoring?" Hood coughed once again to clear his throat.

"Yes sir." Eric replied on the channel. "What happened?"

"Truth found a way to fire the Ark, but it doesn't look like he activated the rings. Some kind of massive rip in subspace is floating over the Ark. For now, we have time. Sierra 117 is moving into Voi to take out that flood ship. Your sector is secure but I don't want anymore damn surprises. Get inside the Ark and find out what the hell Truth has done and where he's going. Secure the Ark if you run into any resistance."

"And the Flood?" Eric questioned.

"The Master Chief and the Arbiter are on top of it."

"Understood, sir." Eric stated as the line terminated. He turned to his team as Gridolee, Migpap and the Spartan's ran into the Ark access cave with him and the Platoon. "Mount up." Eric stated as he climbed into a warthog passenger's seat.

- - - - -

Rose folded her arms and sat on the bench in the heart of the mechanics bay. Equipment parts sat all around her as dust fell from the ceiling. Something had just happened and the Gatekeeper Facility was starting to show its age. She looked around as more and more officers began to file into the room. Nurses and doctors were bringing gurneys of patients and wounded soldiers from the surface levels to the safety of the lower realms of the Facility. The funny thing was that Rose didn't feel safe.

She didn't feel safe in the Elite's Inner Sanctum. She didn't feel safe on the Seed Ship and she didn't feel safe in Eden. She lifted her eyes and studied the metal support structure of the Mechanics bay. Rose was told that the bay was considered a fallout shelter, and designed to support the weight of the entire facility if the super structure folded into itself. Rose studied every bolt, insta-crete slab, metal railing, and support beam. The engineers that had built the Gatekeeper facility were right; the bay was rigid and very sturdy. The metal would bend just enough so that it wouldn't snap. The insta-crete support would reinforce the steel, but only enough to keep it from bending too far and giving-way. Ship grade titanium was used in certain areas to provide radiation fallout support and sturdiness. The Mechanics bay, in theory, really could support the weight of the entire facility if it collapsed.

She still didn't feel safe.

As the bay became more and more crowded, Rose stood and began to walk toward the test cave. It was dangerous to go outside of the mechanical bay's support structure, but Rose needed the isolation.

She wandered into the dusty hills and mixed lighting. She climbed into an empty warthog, completely full of bullet holes, and took a seat on the passenger's side. Others began to walk into the bay as well, mostly to smoke and not bother the wounded and sick that were beginning to fill the mechanical bay. There was plenty of room for roughly two hundred people in the cave, so Rose didn't care if a few dozen smokers lingered about.

Rose put her foot up on the warthogs console and leaned her head back. She wanted to feel safe, and did everything in order to achieve it, but nothing helped. She closed her eyes and turned her head away from the people who were smoking roughly fifty yards away.

"Eric." She whispered as she wiped a tear from her eyes. She thought back to her last moment with Eric. She had shown him the Armor she had made for them, she had held him in his one moment of weakness, and they had made love; perhaps for the last time. She had asked Eric not to go, but she immediately realized how selfish it was to ask him to do that. She apologized for saying it. Eric wasn't a man who could sit back and wait, he never waited. From the moment he was old enough to fight, he fought. Eric had lost a lot in the war, more than Rose could comprehend, but Eric never gave up hope that humanity could win.

She thought back to that moment when she and Eric were finally alone, "Rose," Eric began. "I came back to Earth to help you find a way to fight the Covenant. I wish I had listened to you back when we were still in school. You were right. We can't beat the Covenant by throwing ourselves at them. We need weapons and superior technology. I lost all of my friends in this war, save only Mathew."

"Do you regret it?" Rose asked.

"No. I wouldn't be who I am if the series of events had not played out the way they did. The elites follow me. They see me on an equal footing as them, not in strength but in warrior's pride, and if I had not gone to Dorenth then we wouldn't have the elites' support."

"Do you still hate them?" Rose questioned as she held Eric tightly in her arms.

"Kim died in combat." Eric said. "She was killed in a war against an enemy. The elites that killed her are probably dead. I can't forgive them for that, but I will work with them until this is over."

After that brief conversation, Eric stood and got dressed in the modified SPI armor. That was the only time Rose felt truly safe. When Eric was around she had the feeling that everything would be alright, no matter how tough it seemed.

Rose opened her eyes from her brief nap and looked up into the eyes of a young man standing beside the Warthog in a full marine uniform. The young man brushed his dusty brown hair.

"They told me you were in here." Wesley smiled.

Rose didn't reply, not because she was angry or didn't want to talk to him, she simply couldn't respond. Wesley was not Eric.

"I know I'm not the person you want to see right now." Wesley

explained. "But I had to come down here and see you. Maybe I was a fling, a young boy you could have your way with, but you always made that clear to me. I was the foolish love struck boy that couldn't let go. I'm sorry I was so bitter toward you these past few months. I don't want to die with an angry heart." Rose sat up from her seat in the hog and looked at Wesley earnestly. He then continued. "The brute's broke through the top level defenses but they retreated once Truth activated the Ark, I guess none of them wanted to be left behind."

Wesley adjusted his armor and winced as he lowered his head. "But they didn't leave without giving me a little present." Wesley looked down as blood dripped from his sleeve. Rose hadn't noticed it until she followed Wesley's gaze. A spike was protruding from the side of his chest armor, barely noticeable unless he pointed it out. Rose jumped up and applied pressure to the wound, and frantically turned to call for a medic, but Wesley stopped her.

"Don't." He stated with confidence. "I've done too much in my short life. I helped kill the Major, because of ONI. I killed people who got too close to the Mark VI program when it was under your watch. I spied for Colonel Ackerson. So many humans have died by my handsâ€¦" Wesley winced in pain, finally showing what he was obviously feeling. "I killed so many people, Rose. Not the covenantâ€¦ people. It was my jobâ€¦ I can't forgive myself. I was so afraid of death, of being killed, butâ€¦ but â€¦ nowâ€¦ I'm not scared. I fought the brutesâ€¦ killed a lot of them. I'm still a pretty good sniper."

Wesley leaned forward into Rose's arms. He was getting weaker, but he was keeping a straight face. Rose helped him to the ground and leaned him against the warthog's wheel. "I'm going to die. Die for my sins against humanity." He mumbled. "I didn't want to kill humansâ€¦ people I work with. But ONI said it was alright. I always throw up when I'm scared. I didn't throw up this time." A small smile shined on his pain stricken face.

"Medic's are coming." Rose whispered as she looked up to see two men running toward them.

"You called them?" Wesley smiled. "I didn't hear you call them. You still â€¦ care. Don't you Rose? You care about a stupid kid like me."

"You're going into shock. Focus on me." Rose stated firmly. She pushed Wesley's head back and applied more pressure to the wound. She felt the long metal spike shift as applied pressure to his side, and Wesley grunted from the pain.

Wesley looked at her, "Rose. The flood have landed on Earth againâ€¦ in Voi. On the other side of the Ark. You have to be carefulâ€¦ the Master Chief slowed them downâ€¦ but you know what the flood can do." One of the medics pushed Rose aside and quickly unfastened Wesley's armor. Once the medic pulled off the chest armor he could clearly see the extent of the damage. He shook his head toward the other medic and they both looked at Rose.

"We can give him Morphine, to help." The medic whispered. He then showed Rose the problem. Brute spikes were nearly twelve inches long, and the tip of the spike sticking out of Wesley's side was only three inches; nine inches of the spike was sitting in his chest, and most

likely passed through both lungs and his heart. Wesley was living on sheer adrenaline.

Blood flowed continuously out of the wound and every breath Wesley took became more and more raspy. He was fading fast and there was simply nothing they could do at this point. "He's lost too much blood. If we try to save him now, he'll be in more pain before he eventually dies. He's past the worse of it. He'll lose consciousness and then go peacefully. We're sorry ma'am." The Marine slapped a small injector of Morphine into Wesley's side and then walked away.

"I told youâ€¦ Roseâ€¦ I'm not scared." Wesley smiled. Rose leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead. She sat beside him and let him rest her head on her shoulder. "Hey â€¦ Rose? Don't â€¦ cry anymoreâ€¦ Iâ€¦ don't like itâ€¦" His breathing became long and slow until he eventually stopped.

"I'm sorry I hurt you." Rose sighed as she looked into the ceiling of the cave.

- - - - -

The path ahead of Eric's convoy was brightly lit. A wave of glowing lights shined under the warthogs wheels as pulses of lights bounced about overhead. The Ark structure was alive and well, but as he rode deeper into the subsystems of the Ark he began to grow lightheaded.

A voice echoed in his mind, "Reclaimerâ€¦ why have you come back?"

Eric shook his head. It wasn't his radio or his COM. He looked forward deeper into the path.

"Reclaimerâ€¦ the Path is openâ€¦ follow it. Do not come here."

Eric cupped his head. The voice was inside, coming from his mind. The further he went the more powerful it echoed.

The voice echoed once more, "Species 001, Homo Sapiens subspecies, Reclaimer. You must go to the Ark."

Eric finally answered, no longer believing that this was simply an hallucination. "I am in the Ark."

"No Reclaimer, this is merely the Path. The Ark awaits beyond the wormhole." The voice replied. "Species 004, Species 006, Species 009, Species 037 and Unknown Species have crossed the Path. They can not activate the Ark."

"This isn't the Ark?" Eric questioned.

"This structure, powered by Ark 001, is merely a slip space generator to the furthest point beyond quarantine radius. Ark 001 is the generator for reseeding Earth. Species 011, Humans, are the evolutionary subspecies of Species 001. Only Species 001 or Species 011 can power the control structure for the Ark."

Eric couldn't fathom what the voice was talking about. "What is

beyond the quarantine radius, at the other end of the wormhole?"

"The Ark." The voice sounded annoyed. "Reclaimer, it is Installation 00. You must go there and activate the Halo Installations. Warning, Flood spores detected on the surface. The flood must not enter the Path. Odd, another Reclaimer has been detected near the Flood threat. This Reclaimer was recorded on Installation 04 and 05 recorded data nodes. His intent is â€¦ destructive to the Halos. Installation 04 communication is null. Replacement procedures are underway. This Reclaimer is not useful, however, you and your support will be. Quickly Reclaimer. You must seek the Path and I will close the wormhole behind you."

Eric looked upward as a golden glow began to wash over his body. He turned and watched as four more glows warped around others in the convoy. "What are you doing?"

"Adequate Reclaimers are following you with similar combat skin. I will take you to a means to enter the Path. There is no time to waste." Eric, Greg, Mathew, Dave and Kate vanished from the line of marines. The convoy stopped and everyone looked around nervously.

A marine in the same warthog as Eric shouted. "El Tee? What the hell? Now what do we do?"

Another wide COM broadcast echoed in everyone's ears. "_Tell the humans to take heed." _Radioed a deep elite voice._ "This is the Carrier, _Shadow of Intent_. Clear this sector, while we deal with the Flood._"

**To be
continuedâ€¦**

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```
> / **Ark Data Node...**
> / S**pecies Classification Archive...**
> / **File Retrieval Code** // A-1-7-7-117-2uama3...
> / A**ccess DNA Brand** // Elizabeth Rawlings
```

```
Species 001 : Homo-Sapiens (Ancient Human) :: Reclaimer
classification :: Founder all classes
> Species 002 <strong>/unknown readout errorâ€¦|. Catalog fault::**
Founder Science-explorer Class
> Species 003 <strong>/unknown readout errorâ€¦|. Catalog fault::**
Science- Military Class
> Species 004 : San'Shyuum (Prophet) :: Law Keepers<br> Species 005 :
Sangheili (Elites) :: Military - Security class
> Species 006 : Kig-yar (Jackals) :: working-security class<br>
Species 007 : Unggoy (Grunts) :: working class
> Species 008 : <strong>--- incomplete catalog data---<strong>
> Species 009 : Jiralhanae (Brutes) :: Security-mining-explorer
Class<br> Species 010 : **--- incomplete catalog data---**
> Species 011 : Homo-Sapiens (Human subspecies) :: Reclaimer
classification Human :: All Classes<p>
```

**Species 0â€¦| // data error misfile // thru Species 037**

Species 037 : Yanmee (Drones) :: Working

class

```
-----//  
> <strong>System Notes<strong> ::  
> -<br> -  
> -<br> -A135- Species 003 Possible deletion of catalog entry by  
Access DNA Brand // Standish  
> -<br> -  
> -A172- Data error misfile, possible error in Ark Data Node do to  
Construct Intrusion during time event [1,675,523 hrs rotation  
23460<br> -  
> -A425- Data error recompilation by Construct Cortana-Siren...  
unknown time event.<br> -  
> -<br> -  
  
**End System Notes**::  
>  
-----/
```

23. Check

****SPOILER WARNING: If you have not finished Halo 3, some material
maybe spoiler intensive. You have been warned. ******

>

* * *

><p>Level 23: â€| Check

_Hammer of God
> Camp Eden
> Earth<p>

Simyaldee watched the broadcast from the Sangheili Carrier, _Shadow of Intent_. He folded his arms as Ship Master Vadum, formerly the Spec Ops commander, gave testament to the pursuit of Truth and the Brutes through the Portal, a wormhole of some kind. Tempers flared in the room as Ship Master Vadum attempted to explain the destruction of the human cities that had been infected with Flood spores.

The female human in the room spoke up, agreeing that they should also go through the wormhole and find the solution that the damaged construct spoke of. Lord Hood objected. Yet the Arbiter humbly pointed out that the Flood may win if they do not attempt to find the solution to the Flood. With the Master Chief's agreement, Lord Hood agreed to let them disembark through the wormhole.

As Lord Hood and the others exited the room, Vadum turned to the display and nodded toward Simyaldee. "You've done well in my absence, Second."

"I'm not sure if the title Ship Master suits you, First." Simyaldee replied toward the video display. "You seem more fit leading the charge into combat."

Vadum replied. "The ordeal at Delta Halo was far worse then we could hope. I needed to rally what troops we had left. I spoke with Queen Vasmeol not long ago. Her ship will arrive shortly, but the Seed Ship

will remain at the edge of the system. High Charity is also gaining momentum toward Earth. I suggest that she return to the Seed ship, but she is quite strong willed. Good to know that she has not changed much." Vadum smiled.

"Indeed." Simyaldee replied.

"Secondâ€|" Vadum began, but quickly changed his tone. "Simyal, come with me. Staying here to help the humans is pointless. Their world is doomed." Simyaldee looked to the small human female at his side as she trembled slightly from the words of ship master Vadum. Captain Monroe wasn't pleased about hearing that the fate of humanity was already sealed.

Simyaldee then looked back to Ship Master Vadum. "I have split the Mirratord assault units. My most skilled warriors will accompany you, but I will stay here with Gridol and the Mirratod Grunts."

"The Grunt King still lives?" Vadum clicked his remaining right mandibles in thought. "Why does that not surprise me? The Arbiter will need to be informedâ€| he may not be aware that there are Unggoy who still support our separation." Vadum looked to the display and to Simyal. "Very well, my friend, but I can not say that I understand your decision in staying. My Mirratord units will be sure to do all they can against the bastard Truth. The Queen is going to spare four ships to our attack wave and the remainder will remain here with you. Supreme Commander Timnaldee will place your planet under his gun, if the flood can not be contained, he will be forced to destroy this world."

Simyaldee smirked. "You must have more faith in me than that, my old friend."

"If anyone will survive this next encounter, Second, it will be you." With a clinched fist, Vadum placed his right hand to the center of his chest as he looked into the image of his long time friend and Second in command of the Mirratord.

Simyaldee returned the gesture and nodded his head in respect. "For the honor to the Mirratord." They both stated as the line closed.

Simyaldee looked down at the small fragile human female. She looked up to him and forced a smile. "Thank you."

"Do not thank me yet, Captain. We still have much to prepare for." Simyaldee powered on the terminal displaying the course and trajectory of the remains of High Charity. "That ship has been on the edge of the system for several days, and now it is approaching."

"Siren." Captain Monroe stated.

"Yes, Ma'am?" Siren replied.

"How many ships do we have at our disposal to fight that â€| thing?"

"Not enough. The remaining section of High Charity, ma'am, has a mass roughly equal to the size of a large asteroid. It will be visible

once it is in orbit. And if every MAC cannon remaining took aim and fired, they could not slow it down." Siren stated. "Even with the Elite Queen's assistance our only hope is that the Chief can bring back Cortana's solution."

"I can't believe that it is this hopeless." Monroe sighed. "What about a tactical nuke?"

Siren replied. "If someone could get inside, I am certain that Gravemind could deactivate it."

"How long do we have until it arrives?" Simyaldee questioned.

"Ten hours, six minutes, twenty three seconds." Siren stated. "According to its current heading it will make contact with the atmosphere directly over the portal."

"Could it be attempting to go through it?" Monroe pondered.

"It is a possibility." Simyaldee stated.

Siren interrupted. "Lieutenant, I have a situation. We need to go to the Ark."

"Why?" Monroe questioned with a crooked brow.

"Simyaldee, Grimleon is there and he is waiting for you."

Simyaldee glared at the forward display, his mind full of questions but none of them seemed coherent enough to form words. He could only muster, "How do you know this?"

Siren voiced, "I had to get him off the ship, Lieutenant. I did what was necessary. And I told him that you would come to face him." Her camera's zoomed in on Simyaldee and Monroe. They both appeared troubled, bothered by her actions, and how she seemed to act without justification.

Siren appeared before them in her holographic form, allowing them something to look at in their disbelief. "Captain, I know you are not 100% trustworthy of my abilities due to prior incidents; I have made mistakes due to my emotional subroutines. But I assure you, this action was for the best."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Monroe fumed.

"Because you would not have allowed it." Siren replied assuredly. "The portal, the Wormhole that everyone is talking about, was opened because Iâ€¦ no, because WE allowed it."

Monroe looked at Simyaldee with a puzzled glare. Simyaldee returned the quick look and then asked Siren, "We allowed?"

Siren lowered her head, almost afraid of what she was about to say. "Time is not constant. There are multiple paths. Cortana and I have attempted thousands of time streams to correct the mistakesâ€¦ to fix what was broken. This is the only string we have left. But understanding that would mean a great deal more understanding of the influxes of spatial time distortion. Simply put; the Portal had to be opened and the Path needed to be followed. To do that, Truth needed

the Luminous Key, so I gave it to him."

"Luminous Key?" Simyaldee questioned. "A ship core?"

"Yes. But not just any ship core, the Ark ship core." Siren turned to Monroe as the Captain looked at her in a gaze of pure shock.

"Captain, you must understandâ€¦."

"No." Monroe softly stated. "You opened Pandora's Box, Siren. You gave Truth a power that he should not have. Now look! Look at what he's done! He went to power on the Halo's and to destroy everything!"

"No ma'am. He has merely walked the path. He still does not have the power he needs. But if Cortana and I are correct, we will be grateful that we allowed him to go. The Arbiter and the Master Chief will go and do their parts while weâ€¦"

"What in gods name could make me be thankful for giving that fanatic access to the most powerful weapon in the Galaxy?" Monroe shouted.

Siren looked away shyly and replied. "I don't know. It's up to them to decide the future now."

"Who?" Simyaldee shouted.

Siren looked into the eyes of the elite Mirratord Second in Command. "Two will come; one whom you know, and one you do not. They were predestined to come. One of War and one of Chaos. Both will lead you to the Path. Though divided they will lead you. Follow them. Follow them and survive."

"What are you talking about?" Monroe questioned with an irritated scowl.

Siren looked to her. "The Path of Reclamation, ma'am. This was stated in the Ark Data Node. I have been processing this information for days on end, analyzing and calculating every word. What I find even more interesting, is the line; One is an ancient enemy, the other is an old Friend. The Path of Reclamation was written for the Reclaimers, humans."

"Get to the point!" Monroe scuffed. She was losing her patience with Siren's constant actions.

"The Chief and the Arbiter, ma'am." Siren smirked. "One you know and one you do not. They will do their part while we do ours. Cortana agrees. Not for her sake, but for the sake of everyone."

"We are going through the portal, both human and elite." Simyaldee added. "But none of this explains why? We would not be in danger if you had not given that Brute the key!"

"Had I not given them the key, you would all die here as food for the Flood." Siren retorted.

"And you are sure of this?" Simyaldee questioned.

"Yes." Siren answered. "Simyaldee, please, we must go to the Ark. I

am certain that all of your answers will be there. As well as my own."

Simyaldee huffed. "I will go, if only to kill Grimleon and end his infernal obsession."

"Captain." Siren added. "I'm going with him. I guess that you don't care."

Monroe turned her back and began to walk off the command podium. "Do whatever you want, Siren. You always do."

"Thank you ma'am." Siren stated with nod.

Simyaldee powered on his COM. "Sergeant, assemble the Mirrator at the landing deck. We are going to the Ark."

"Me understand." Palab replied over the line.

- - - - -

Ark 001 : Forge Chamber
> Earth<p>

A pulse of golden light appeared in a large dark room, followed by four more golden pulses of light. Eric stood and shook the cobwebs from his head. It was a teleportation grid and there was no way of knowing where they were; or if they were still on Earth for that matter.

"What in the hell just happened?" Kate barked as she held her spinning head.

"Hell if I know." Dave sat down, he was dizzy as well.

Eric barked, "After affects from teleportation. It'll pass." Eric was thankful that he had read Cortana's Halo report thoroughly. The Master Chief had also had a sense of dizziness his first time. Eric noticed that nearly all of his platoon leaders were with him with the exception of Gridolee. "Lieutenant, do you copy?"

".. hear youâ€| rable one. What has happened?" Gridolee questioned over the line.

Eric was thankful; this meant that they were still inside the Ark, or whatever it was. "Things have changed. You have command of the platoon. Fall back to the entrance and stand by for orders."

"But Honorable one, do you not need support?" Gridolee ushered.

Eric looked around. He couldn't see much of anything. Infrared showed nothing but his team of Spartans and night vision also showed a blank slate. "Unknown. We don't know where we are at the moment. Fall back until we can get our bearings."

"As you wish." Gridolee replied and the line terminated.

"For a place with so much light on the outside, why is it so dark in here?" Mathew yelled.

"Reclaimers, forgive me." A voice echoed back from the void of darkness. "The Forge system has not been used until this moment. Please, adjust your visual spectrum while I modify the ambience." The lights slowly began to turn on as Eric and the others looked around. The space was far larger then they thought possible. It was big enough to hold a UNSC Marathon Class battle ship.

They all stood in the center of an enormous oval shaped chamber. The walls slanted upward and then angled back toward the top in a dome. The floor glowed as if the lights were inside the floor itself. The walls slowly began to spin around the room, so slow that it was only noticeable if they watched a point for several seconds.

"The Forge system is currently powering itself. There have been six hundred tests and zero actual uses of the Forge system since creation."

"What is this, Forge, you speak of?" Mathew replied.

The voice replied in a confused manor. "The Forge is a construction utility imprinted to respond to your needs. How can you not know this?"

"We've never been here." Eric replied.

"The Forge system, for that matter the Ark system, was well documented in the Ark Data Node. I show that there have been six hundred and fifty two accesses to the Ark Data Node since it reached full maturity two hundred and thirty years ago, according to your current star placements." The voice paused. "You should be well versed in the Ark, as well as the Forge System."

Eric held up his hands to everyone, silencing them. "You brought us here to follow the Path to the ark, correct?"

"Correct, Reclaimer."

"How will we follow the Path?"

"All of the Reclaimer ships nearby are currently defending against the Flood threat. They can not be recalled to take you through the Wormhole created by Ark 001. However the Forge System was designed to assist Reclaimers in space travel technology. Ark 001 can make a ship for you, Reclaimer. There is no time for all of these questions. I will begin construction immediately."

Eric opened his radio, "Lord Hood, do you copy?"

"Speak fast 19, I'm on my way to meet with the Arbiter and that damned Ship Master that is glassing the region." Lord Hood sounded furious.

Eric wanted to know what he meant but made his statement. "Sir, the structure is a Wormhole generator. Truth went through it, but he still can't fire the Halo's. There is something on the other side that can activate the Halo's."

"That makes sense. The flood cleaned out all of my Voi regiments since they crashed into the city. But for now we at least have the situation stable."

"It's not easy dealing with the flood sir." Eric replied as he watched thousands of constructor drones fly into the room with parts and began to assemble them. The object floated in place as the drones began to weld at a frantic pace. In less than a minute there was the appearance of a solid structure taking the form of a ship. "Once I'm done here, I'll go to Voi and be sure that threat is neutralized."

"Voi is gone, Lieutenant." Hood added. "The ship master made short work of the entire region west of Ark. He even glassed half the continent under the ship's crash course in case the flood were able to jump from the ship when it slipped in. I'm gathering troops at Mombasa to begin inspecting the neighboring regions for flood outbreaks. Once you have secured that â€| Portal generatorâ€| meet me there."

Though the elites caused a great deal of collateral damage at least the flood were somewhat contained. "Understood. Do you plan to send a contingent after Truth?"

"Negative. Earth is all we have left. If we go after truth and his fleetâ€| we won't stand a chance. We make our stand here. Rally your troops inside the Gatekeeper facility, I'll be in touch after I finish briefing the ship master. It seems they found Cortana, or another clone."

Eric listened and watched in amazement at how fast the Forge could build a ship. "Roger that, sir. Also, I've found something useful. I'll inform you after your meeting."

Eric turned to his team. "Disperse by twos, full inspection of the area." He began to walk away from the team; alone. "17, you with 08. 09 and 21 watch each other. Look for a door that leads deeper into the facility."

"Reclaimer, I can leadâ€|"

"No thanks." Eric silenced the voice. "I need to give them something to do while I think."

"I see." The voice said.

"Are you a monitor, or a keeper?" Eric questioned.

"Neither. The Keeper model is the most advanced form of Artificial Intelligence created, however, I am more sophisticated than the Instillation Monitors. I am the voice of the Arkâ€| or that is what I told those who came before, they were quiet primitive. They demanded of me that I be informal toward the Reclaimers that entered the Ark for training. My full title is Ark Artificial Intelligence, Offensive Bias."

"Training? Who have you trained?" Eric questioned.

"I have not trained a Reclaimer in five thousand, six hundred sixty nine of your solar years." The AI stated. "The female Reclaimer was quite exceptional at her duties. She was a direct descendant of the Reclaimer's who returned to Earth with Ark 001."

"So only humans have been here?" Eric questioned.

"Oh no. The Empire settled on Earth many years before it was repurposed. Though great care was taken to remove any sign of alien life, your Ancestors prided themselves on secrecy, to protect the people from the fear of going into space before they were ready."

"And we're still a thousand years too early." Eric commented. "There are bones on Earth, skeletal remains of other creatures."

"A museum. One was created for the day you would be advanced enough to locate the Ark Data Node. Inside you should have seen the remains of numerous Species that are supportive to the Empire." Eric recalled the skeletons he had seen.

He walked to the far side of the dome shaped room as the ship above his head continued to take shape. He reached the wall and found no sign of a door. Eric then began to walk along the edge of the wall, counter to its slow rotation. "Earlier, you called me Species 001."

"Yes, Forerunner classification. Augmented Humanoid."

"Forerunner? You mean people like me built all of this?" Eric questioned.

"Not entirely. You are a Reclaimer, a member of the Forerunner Empire. Your seat was that of a ruling class."

Eric stopped walking. "I thought we weren't considered Forerunner? That's what the Monitors have told us."

"Monitor AIs are not given full data to Forerunner archives for the safety of the Reclaimers descendants and the future of the Empire. A monitor would first need to be connected to the Ark Data Node, or Installation 00, before their data is updated with the difference between a Reclaimer and a Forerunner. You have inherited all that the Forerunners left behind."

"Am I a Forerunner?" Eric sternly questioned.

"In theory. However, you are a member of the Forerunner ruling class. A Reclaimer: a Descendant of the Forerunners. They were your heirs, and you have inherited their empire. Have I not made that clear?"

Eric shook his head at the annoying answer. "Who are the Forerunners?"

The voice paused. "Your Ancestors were the Forerunners. They were also called Reclaimers. The difference, according to records, is this; augmentation. Reclaimers are Forerunners who have been given a gene which greatly increases their metabolic structure and physical size. You are a Reclaimer, who was a Forerunner. However, there are no longer any forerunners remaining. They died during the first activation of Halo, as was planned. Physically, Forerunners are smaller than you, less hair, thin build, with higher intellect. You are of a similar genetic and DNA makeup, however you have evolved into a larger more muscular form; at the cost of brain power. You,

Reclaimer, are only considered a Tier 3. The Forerunners, your ancestors, were Tier 1. By process of their own destruction, the Forerunners, Species 001, have left you as the sole heir of the Empire. Thus, by terminology of inheritance, you are Forerunner."

Eric, feeling somewhat confused at the complex answer, started walking once again and attempted to ignore what he had just heard. "Where's the damn door?"

The AI replied. "It is here." An image appeared on Eric's HUD. The AI had accessed his suit and placed a marker to the door. Eric turned and saw a large pathway near the wall. It was a slanted path that led under the wall. It was not a normal doorway because the walls were moving and the doorway needed to be stationary.

Eric tapped his COM. "Found it. Everyone meet up at my marker." Eric walked to the ramp which lead downward and the AI's voice echoed.

"Please wait, Reclaimer. There are others within this corridor. I believe you call them Brutes."

Eric froze at the edge of the ramp. "How many?"

"Three."

"Can you deal with them?"

"Weapon's systems are offline do to Forge activity. The Forge uses, 78 of Ark 001â€¦"

"I get it!" Eric shouted in protest. He clipped his COM. "Double time! Weapons hot! 08, 09 and 17 flank left of the tunnel. 21 form up on me to the right." Four green lights winked on his HUD.

Mathew was the first to sprint passed Eric to the other side, followed closely by Kate and Greg. Dave slid into position behind Eric and they all held their assault rifles at the ready.

"Three Tango's in the tunnel, moving toward us." Eric added over the COM. "Offensive Bias, are there any other brutes in the Ark?"

"No. They all journeyed through the Wormhole. It is awkward that they chose to remain behind."

Eric looked toward Mathew. "Frag when they are in range."

"Roger that." Mathew primed a grenade and held it until the brutes were visible. Kate and Dave did the same.

Eric spoke to Greg. "Once they throw the frags, you and I will go in and clear."

"Yes sir." Greg G009 replied.

Everyone spotted the movement of enemy signatures on their HUD radars and three Fragmentation grenades sailed into the tunnel. There was the sound of the frags bouncing off the ground and then three loud explosions. Eric turned the corner and Greg followed.

They leveled their rifles as they charged into the thinning smoke and Eric spotted the golden glow of a bubble shield. "Damn." He shouted as he stopped and blocked Greg's forward progress. The brutes were most likely safe, and protected from ranged fire, but Eric instantly realized that he and Greg had no form of cover in the long tunnel.

"Fall back!" Eric shouted. Greg quickly began to back peddle while keeping his gun aimed down the tunnel. Eric was fast stepping behind him, also keeping his gun locked on the bubble shield. Inside were the three Brutes, but their images were distorted by the shield. Eric fired an insurance round at the shield, to simply keep the brutes inside until they reached cover, but one of the brutes charged anyway.

Eric's heart nearly stopped as he watched the familiar image of a golden armored brute break free of the bubble shield, and made a direct charge toward him.

"Grimleon?" Eric nervously questioned under his own breath. It couldn't be the same brute that Simyaldee and Gridolee had dueled against in the desert? Eric kept retreating, and started firing into the golden hulk stampeding toward him.

Mathew, Dave, and Kate stepped from the cover of the tunnel exit and took aim over Eric and Greg's shoulders. "Covering fire!" Mathew shouted.

Eric felt the wake of the AR rounds flying over his shoulders but watched as the Brute bounded from side to side. He was fast and agile. But it couldn't be Grimleon. There were too many brutes in the Covenant for him to run into the same beast that escaped two Mirratord warriors.

Eric turned toward Greg and shouted, "Run!"

Greg dipped his shoulder and sprinted to the top of the tunnel, doing his best to avoid friendly fire. Eric was quick on his heels, but his radar was flaring brightly as the huge Brute was quickly gaining ground. Eric primed a frag grenade and dropped it at his feet. The grenade exploded just as the brute stepped over it, but it didn't slow him down.

Eric opened his team channel. "Get clear! Wide dispersal! Take him out but don't let him get close to you!" Eric reached the top of the ramp just in time to watch his Spartans scatter.

Eric spun on his heel to get out of the Brute Chieftain's path, but as he turned he felt the vice grip of a massive hand on his shoulder. He turned his AR and stuck it into the beast's chest. As he pulled the trigger a wave of static washed over Grimleon's armor; a shield generator.

Eric felt himself being flung to the ground as his HUD flashed brightly from the impact. His GEL layer pulsed to absorb the blow, but he still felt something pop. Eric didn't have time to figure out what had been broken. He stood and rolled clear of Grimleon's reach.

"Grimleon!" Eric shouted at the Brute.

Grimleon knelt low, his arms wide and glared at the human that had spoken his name. "You know my name. Then I shall ask if you know where Simyal is?"

"You'll never see him." Eric pulled down his RPG from his back holster, and affixed his assault rifle. Grimleon tilted his head as the rocket roared from the shoulder mounted tube. Smoke engulfed the beast as Eric lowered the barrel slightly. It was a direct hit.

Grimleon sprinted from the cloud, unfazed, and closed the gap between him and Eric in two strides. Eric tried to back off, but Grimleon wrapped his paw around Eric's neck and held him at bay.

Eric could hear the sound of AR fire around him. His team of Spartans was fighting back against the brute, but the brute was unfazed. Eric fought the urge to black out as the grip around his neck tightened.

Mathew rallied the team. "09 and 17, get the El Tee clear. 21 follow me and aim for the back of that Brute's head." Mathew slapped in a fresh clip and leveled the riffle. He emptied a clip into the brute and then loaded another as he charged closer. Dave was at his side, firing heavily into the brute, but its shields would not fall. Mathew, frustrated and worried about his friend, jumped onto Grimleon's arm and began to kick into the beast's ribcage. The Brute staggered backward, but only slightly, and both Mathew and Eric fell to the ground. Dave dived at Grimleon's back and slammed the butt stock of his AR into Grimleon's neck. The Brute staggered forward, but then swung back with his left hand and hit Dave across the face. Dave's gel layer swelled to absorb the impact of Grimleon's massive fist, but the blow was monstrous. Dave rolled across the floor, tumbled and came to a stop in an unconscious state.

Mathew picked up Eric's RPG and fired into Grimleon's chest. The brute roared as pain finally registered. His shields faded and he roared in protest. Greg and Kate charged with a full auto spread. AR rounds pinged against Grimleon's armor, but the Brute was far from defeated.

Grimleon side stepped, jumped and rolled clear of the charging humans. Mathew stood and grabbed the last RPG round from Eric's holster, but while he loaded the RPG he was forced to watch Grimleon's incredible speed. The brute bounded around Greg and Kate as they attempted to keep him at arms length. Whenever they had a clear shot, he would dodge and reposition. He was fast, nimble and almost gymnastically acrobatic. It was a sight to see a creature of his size and muscle structure move so swiftly. Mathew's gut tensed up as he closed the barrel and leveled the rocket. Could one brute Chieftain really outclass five Spartans?

Greg fired while backing away from the brute but Grimleon leapt into the air and landed between Kate and Greg; sepearting them. Mathew had to hold his fire or else he could kill Kate or Greg. Greg kicked out and hit Grimleon in the back of the leg. Grimleon, unfazed, gripped Greg's leg and held him over his head. Kate fired a full clip into the brute's side, spraying its blood over the metal floor, but Grimleon seemed unfazed. He was certainly wounded, but the pain

didn't seem to register in his feral state.

Grimleon held Greg's leg in one hand and then gripped his head in another. The brute Chieftain roared and brought the Spartan down upon its knee. Kate shrieked in horror as she saw Greg's back bend awkwardly over the brute's powerful knee. Grimleon dropped Greg as if he were a toy doll and then gave chase after Kate.

Mathew watched as Greg's armor signal turned into an X on his HUD. He didn't know what to think of the image. He knew Greg was dead, but seeing the image of an X display beside the name of a fellow soldier didn't quite register with Mathew. It was such a final, yet insignificant sign that Mathew wondered if Kate was also seeing the same signal. He quickly changed the X to MIA. Missing in Action felt less final, but in truth they all knew what had happened to Greg.

Mathew pushed the database off of his HUD, ran toward the Brute and fired the last RPG. It detonated at Grimleon's feet, sending the brute tumbling to the side. Kate was also hit by the blast, but her shields held and merely knocked her to the ground. She stood and ran to Mathew's side.

Mathew opened his COM. "Gridolee! Get down here, now! Bring everything we have and make it fast!" Mathew took a half step back and watched as Grimleon shook off the shock from the rocket propelled grenade and stood once again. This was too much. Mathew snarled under his breath and began to beg that the brute die.

"AI!" Mathew shouted.

"Yes Reclaimer?"

"Help the rest of our team find us! We need them here!" Mathew shouted as Grimleon pulled off his dented armor and helmet. He then unclipped his replacement gravity hammer and held it tightly in his hands. Blood dripped from his side and he slammed his fist to his chest in a display of power.

"I am Grimleon, Chieftain of the Red Clan! If you plan to call for help, human, then announce my name and tell all to tremble!"

Mathew whispered to Kate, "Get 19 and 21 to the far side of the room."

"Grimleon?" Mathew's COM vibrated as Gridolee roared in protest on the other end. "Damn you, brute! You dare to show your head?"

Gridolee turned to the platoon and shouted, "Follow as best you can!" Gridolee jumped onto the back of a Mongoose ATV and yelled to the human, "Go! Do not wait for the platoon!"

"Hang on, sir!" The ATV accelerated into the cave as the sound of the AI began to grow louder.

"You are almost in range of my teleportation grid." Suddenly Gridolee and the ATV vanished in a golden glow.

A bright flash appeared in the center of the gigantic Forge room as

Gridolee and the ATV driver held their heads for a moment. Gridolee focused and glared across the massive room. "Go!" He pointed toward the brute holding the hammer, and the marine throttled.

The ATV sped across the room, while the marine at its helm began to cheer with curses toward the distant brute. Grimleon turned to face the charging vehicle. Gridolee planted his foot higher on the back of the mongoose and jumped forward. The Marine turned the ATV and got clear. He didn't want to risk being hit by the Chieftain's hammer.

Grimleon watched as the suicidal elite lunged toward him. He pulled his hammer from his back and gripped it in a batter's pose, and swung. Gridolee shifted his weight in mid air and the hammer grazed over his head. Gridolee sliced his twin blade across the brute's chest, but Grimleon back away before he could cut him.

Grimleon chuckled as he sniffed the air. "I know your stench. Have you come to die this time?"

"I am a fast learner, brute." Gridolee retorted.

"Where is the one that holds your leash?" Grimleon questioned. "Where is Simyal? I was promised that he would come!"

"Sorry, beast. He has other matters to attend to. You will face me."

Grimleon watched as numerous pulses of golden lights appeared in the center of the room. The rest of the platoon was being teleported inside the Forge room and Grimleon was not going to wait for the human's to set up there artillery.

Grimleon snarled at Gridolee. "Let us play a game, Mirrator scum. I'll kill more of your human pets and let us see if you can stop it!" He turned and sprinted toward the gathering humans. Gridolee gave chase.

On the far side of the Forge room, Kate pulled Eric beside Dave and checked both of their readouts. Eric had a dislocated shoulder, but he was also going in and out of consciousness. "A concussion?" Kate questioned to herself. Dave was in a better state. He was knocked out from the punch, but no major injuries.

A transport hog roared up to the area and a medic jumped out. Kate looked at them and looked back as Grimleon ran toward the platoon. She had to go help them. "Set up a defense around this area. Bring the wounded here if you can."

"Wounded ma'am?" The medic asked. "These are the only two wounded."

"There will be more." She shouted as she ran toward the platoon.

She watched as Grimleon seemed to match Gridolee's pace and hurled himself into the midst of the platoon. Marines cursed and fired blindly as they attempted to understand what was going on. A warthog flipped into the air as the massive hammer slammed into its side. Gridolee dived onto Grimleon's back and the two creatures rolled for several feet. Gridolee kicked Grimleon clear of the humans and stood

his ground between them.

Grimleon laughed as he stood. He was truly enjoying himself.

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"_Reclaimerâ€| why have you come back?"_

Eric looked around his eyes could barely focus. He watched as a marine medic connected a data pad to his SPI armor readout port. What had happened to him?

"_Reclaimerâ€| descendant of the Forerunners."_

Eric checked his own readout. A dislocated shoulderâ€| andâ€| head trauma. No it was something else. He couldn't focus.

"_Ericâ€| I made this especially for you."_

Eric lifted his palm and examined his glove. He could see that the Medic was saying something to him, but he couldn't understand what the man was saying. Eric thought more about his armor, his new modified SPI armor. A diagnostic screen emerged. Gel Layer had spiked, it couldn't absorb the ground impact and prevent his shoulder from popping free. Eric was thankful, it could have been a lot worse.

"_Ericâ€| I adjusted the power setting so that you can use it."_

The Diagnostic readout showed medium. What had Rose done to the Armor? What modifications had she done? Eric opened his mouth but no words formed. What was wrong with him? He hated that he hadn't paid more attention to the armor; attempted to understand all of its limits. Why was it set to medium and not full? Eric needed the power.

"_Ericâ€| it can up the power. I've been working on it."_

What was Rose doing to the armor? She said she did it to the Mark VI, but did she also do it to the SPI? The power setting was set so that Eric and Mathew could use them. They weren't full Spartans. If they tried to wear the Mark VI MJOLNIR the weight of the suit would crush their bones if they exerted themselves. So what made the SPI armor different?

"_Ericâ€| I used the Reclaimer armor as a sourceâ€|"_

Rose was talking about the Reclaimer armor. But what did she mean? Eric sat up. He placed his hand on the Medic's shoulder and gave him a thumb's up. Eric watched as Kate ran toward the commotion as the brute Chieftain slammed his hammer into anything that moved.

The Medic began, "Sir, you read outs show â€|"

"I'm fine." Eric countered. He stood and rolled his shoulder until he heard a sharp pop, followed by the muffled sound of bone and cartilage reuniting. Eric grunted, flexed his shoulder until the soreness was only an afterthought, and then picked up an assault rifle. He watched as the marine medic pressed a series of commands on his data pad and forced Dave's SPI Armor to induce a mild stimulant.

Dave shook his head and sat up as his the injection brought him forcefully out of his unconscious state.

Eric saw that Gridolee and Migpap had arrived and opened his team channel. "Gridolee, pull any mobile marines up to your side and block of that brute with a line of weapons fire. Keep him away from the platoon. 08, get the 'spits' hog and flank him. 17, form up the platoon and get them organized." Eric looked up as the constructors began to power on the covenant shaped ship above his head. Three acknowledgement lights flashed in his HUD. "Offensive Bias."

"Yes Reclaimer?"

"What's the status of the flood threat?"

"Flood forms on the surface have been mostly neutralized, but long range sensors are detecting a Flood controlled ship on approach vector."

Eric huffed. This battle was far from over. "Offensive Bias, get my platoon into that ship." Eric turned to Dave, "21. Get back to the Gatekeeper facility, and tell everyone to stand by for evacuation."

"What about that Brute, El Tee?" The medic stated as he nervously peered into the distance. One Brute was never a problem for one Platoon to deal with, but this brute, this Warhammer, was on a scale never encountered.

Eric pulled the hammer back on the AR and began to walk toward the battle. "I'll deal with it."

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Ark Excavation site // Mombasa observatory
> ONI Facility Bravo A-11092G: The Gatekeeper
 Mombasa,
Kenya

Lord Hood's pelican landed on the upper level elevator of the Gatekeeper facility. Vice Admiral Parangosky saluted as he descended from the bird's ramp. Hood did not return the gesture.

"Forgive my rudeness, Vice Admiral, but let's skip the formalities." Hood removed his hat and wiped the sweat from his aging brow.

Parangosky added. "Fine with me. What happened? Where are they going?"

Hood sat down on a barricade as marines created a large circle around him. "The Chief thinks that there is a way to stop the Flood. Cortana suggested that they go to the other side of that portal and find it. I'm not so sure it was a good idea."

Parangosky sat at Hoods side as one of the Gatekeeper facility's tech staff brought them cups of coffee. Parangosky took a sip and she smiled at Hood. "We have less then eight hours before High Charity arrives. We are only down one ship. If Ackerson's reports are correct, one ship won't make a difference. We won't last long."

Hood sipped the coffee in his hand and watched as the last Elite cruiser entered the wormhole. "Any record on what happened to that bastard Ackerson?"

"Ackerson? No sir. MIA."

Hood raised a brow and then looked at the Vice Admiral. "I also noticed that Major Rawlings was reported as KIA. Shot down by a brute seraph patrol."

"Yes sir." Parangosky replied as she sipped more of her coffee. That was ONI's official report on the Major. Her true crimes were burned along with her body.

"ONI always has a way of dealing with those that seemingly act on their own." Hood whispered as he shook his head mockingly. He then pulled his hat back on and looked around the area.

"We do what must be done, Sir." She replied. Parangosky knew that Hood was no fool. Ackerson and Rawlings had both went a foul of humanity and ONI, but in the end they both did what they could for humanity to survive.

Hood stood and his guard detailed stood along side him. "Then find a way to stop High Charity. Also, find out why I can't contact the Black Ops. I tried to contact 19 a few moments ago."

"Sir, they went into the Ark two hours ago. We lost communications with them one hour later. There was report of a Brute Chieftain attacking the Platoon."

"One Chieftain can't stop five Spartan's, Vice Admiral."

"We are investigating." Parangosky stood and brushed the dust from her pants.

Hood huffed. "When this mess is over, and if I live long enough, we will have a full enquiry into the Office of Naval Intelligence. These past fifteen years are full of holes, Vice Admiral. And I don't like holes." Hood turned to the Gatekeeper door and began to walk inside. "We have five functioning MAC guns in orbit with minimal support staff. That is not enough to stop High Charity. Contact Eden, Noah, Shenandoah and Yosemite. Inform them to restrict surface travel to all civilians until otherwise ordered." Hood looked into the sky, at the glowing blue portal that lead to the furthest reaches of the galaxy. "This could very well be the end of the world."

****To be continuedâ€|**
**> **

*** * ***

**> Coming soon:
 Level 24: ... Checkmate**
**> Level 25: To whom it may concern --Finale---

24. Checkmate

****Level 24: Checkmate****

Sangheili Flagship: _The Key of Deliverance
> High Charity Orbit

Queen Vasmeola and Commander Yalsmadee stood at the front of the command deck. Silence filled the air as they listened to the constant outcries of their boarding teams that had penetrated the husk formally known as High Charity.

Commander Yalsmadee lowered his head in frustration as he slammed his fist upon the console. "Damned parasite! That was the second platoon we've sent in."

"Be calm commander." Vasmeola huffed as she folded her arms across her lap. She sat back in her seat and continued to watch the data before her. Her mind was split between the battle to stop High Charity from reaching Earth and what had happened to her on the Quarantine station. Her memories were completely blank during the time she was placed in the stasis field, but what troubled her even more was that she felt awkward. She felt as though she had been touched. She had one of her handmaids examine her, but they found nothing out of the ordinary. Still, it did not put her mind at ease. Something had happened while she was in stasis, something she perhaps didn't want to remember.

"My Queen." A helmsman shouted. "The Humans are sending four warships to assist."

"Open a line." Vasmeola ordered. She glared forward as a human commander looked back at her. "I am Queen Vas'meol. The _Fleet of Retribution_ has made several attempts tooâ€|"

"_Forgive my rudeness, but we don't have the time to try to slow that ship down. I have a few dozen ODS'T who are going aboard that ship to nuke it from the inside before it can get within the atmosphere."_

Vasmeola huffed. "We have already attempted to send several units inside to disable the ship's primary engine core. The ship is being driven by several stationary cruisers linked to a central power line inside of High Charity. A Gravemind guards it."

The humans shot back, "_It stops or we all die."_ The human commander paused as he looked at another screen. "_Yes sir."_

After pressing a few key strokes a second screen appeared on the display. An older human decorated in all white stood before the Queen and bowed his head in respect. "_Ship master Vadum said that I should speak directly to you."_

"And you are?" Vasmeola questioned.

"_My name is Sir Terrance Hood. While under Military watch, I am the leader of Earth and all of her defenses."_

Vasmeola stood and bowed before the human. "As I was telling your subordinate, we have already attempted several raids against High Charity. I have lost numerous warriors. If you wish to stop High Charity, you will need to find another way. A direct assault is currently futile."

Lord Hood looked to the side of the display, talking to someone off screen. _"How much time do we have?"_ He asked. He then returned to the screen. _"Queen Vas'meol, we need more time. We understand that we can not stop High Charity, but that is not the option right now. I was just informed that there is another way."_

Hood stepped to the side and a large Sangheili warrior in black armor stepped in his place. _"My Queen."_

Vasmeola instantly recognized Simyaldee. "Speak Lieutenant."

"_Can you slow High Charity's descent?"_

"It could be possible to disable one or more of the ships propelling it, but surely Gravemind will defend against this."

"_All we need is time."_ Simyaldee nodded. _"Notify Supreme Commander Timnald that we must force High Charity into the Portal. But first, we must convince Gravemind that it would be in its best interest to go through it, and not attack Earth."_

Lord Hood cut in. _"What in the hell are you talking about? We can't let the Flood go through that Portal. They'll destroy the only chance we have at stopping them when they get to the other side."_

Simyaldee turned to Hood. _"You're construct seems to believe that this is the only option you have."_

Hood placed his hands to his temples. _"First Cortana and now Siren."_ He looked up at Simyaldee. _"Why?"_

"_Because the Master Chief can stop it."_ Simyaldee stated. _"There is a way to stop the Flood, and your Spartan, along with the Arbiter, will find a way to end it. Is it not better that the battle occurs at the Ark and not on Earth? "_

Vasmeola voiced, "How will you convince Gravemind?"

"_By giving him what he wants; a way to survive."_ Simyaldee replied. _"I must find the honorable human. I must go. Slow the ship down until we arrive."_

Simyaldee walked away from the screen and Hood took his place. _"Keep me informed."_ He stated to the Queen.

"You as well." Vasmeola replied. "Whom is this Honorable human, that Simyal speaks of?"

"_My trump card."_ Hood answered. _"He completed the Sangheili Trials while on your home world."_

"Then this is a human I must meet." Vasmeola smiled as she closed the channel. "Communications, notify Supreme Commander Timnald that we need to destroy High Charity's ability to move. Hopefully if we strike quickly we can slow the ship down before Gravemind becomes aware of our actions." Vasmeola then looked to the human commander leading the four ships. "Prepare your ships, human. The call to battle is upon us."

The human commander powered off his display with a strong nod. Vasmeola then turned to Commander Yalsmadee. "Did you see him?" She whispered.

"Yes." He smirked. "He looks to be a great warrior."

"You have his structure and stance. Would you like to meet him?" She asked. "You have earned the right, as a Warrior, to meet your father."

"Perhaps one day." He quickly added. "When we have found a new home and the Prophets rule is well behind us. But I wonder if we should trust these humans. Why did we not stop them from following the Path?"

Vasmeola returned to her seat and glared forward. "One obstacle at a time, commander. It seems that the humans, the Reclaimers, have no desire to active Halo's might as the Path of Reclamation demands of them. We will be cautious, and if Simyal can trust them, so shall I."

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Ark Excavation site // Mombasa observatory
> ONI Facility Bravo A-11092G: The Gatekeeper<p>

Hood watched as Simyaldee walked out of the temporary command station. "What is your plan?" He questioned with a shout. "How will you convince the Flood to go through? What is Siren planning?"

Simyaldee turned and looked to the humans that were also curious about his answer. "Siren tells me that the answer lies within the Ark." Simyaldee turned and trotted from the room. He made his way through the numerous corridors and hallways until he arrived at the elevator that would return him to the main cavern leading into the Ark.

At the base of the elevator stood Palab and his Mirratord grunts. "What say human leader?"

"They will try to give us the time the Construct needs." Simyaldee stated as he held up Siren's data core. "There has been no contact with the honorable human in quite some time."

"Brute Chieftain still there?"

Simyaldee nodded. "There have been no communications since the humans entered and engaged the Warhammer. Come, we must not delay." Simyaldee, Palab and the Mirratord grunts sprinted down the cave. The flooding lights of the Ark rolled around them as they trotted down the tunnel. Palab and the Mirratord grunts strode alongside Simyaldee on all fours as they sniffed the air for any signs of trouble.

After a few hundred meters a voice echoed in the tunnels. "Ah, another Sangheili and Unggoy. Have you come to assist the Reclaimers?"

"A Construct?" Simyaldee stopped and questioned. "Where are the humansâ€¦ the Reclaimers?"

"I have placed those that survived the battle inside the ship, as ordered by the Reclaimer's leader. The others are being held prisoner by the Jiralhanae or they are dead."

"We must hurry!" Simyaldee began to race ahead but quickly found himself engulfed in a golden light.

"You have arrived." The AI's voice replied.

Simyaldee held his head as he stood to his feet. Palab and the last of the Mirratord grunts stood at his side. Simyaldee looked around the massive Forge room and was dwarfed by its size. Above him floated a small Covenant shaped ship, yet it only looked partially assembled.

The voice added. "The ship is nearing completion and should be done within the hour. The wounded Reclaimers are to your left."

Simyaldee turned and saw several dozen humans in piles of dead flesh. He quickly pulled his twin blades free from his holster as the familiar stench of his foe filled his nostrils.

In the distance stood three Brutes, and one of them was not wearing any armor.

Grimleon shouted across the room. "I knew you would come, Simyal. I have been waiting." The two brutes assisted Grimleon in putting on a new set of Armor as the Chieftain gripped his hammer.

Simyaldee ignored Grimleon's banter. "Lieutenant Raynord, where are you?" He looked around but nothing moved. "Sergeant, cloak and find the honorable one." Palab and the six grunts of his team cloaked and vanished from sight. "Can anyone read me on this channel?"

"Who is this?" Came a female reply.

"Lieutenant Simyald of the Mirratord."

"The Elites? Hey, you need to get out of there, that brute is a monster, he nearly killed the entire platoon. We're on the ship waiting for the weapons systems to come online."

"Where is the honorable human, Lieutenant Raynord?" Simyaldee questioned on the line.

"We got separated." Her voice was heavy. "19 told us to board the ship with the Platoon. Him and Lieutenant Gridolee stayed behind to fight that Brute."

Simyaldee's eyes showed what his ears heard. Across the room sat Gridolee's unmoving form. He sprinted towards the body and knelt at Gridolee's side. "Brother"

Gridolee slowly turned his head. He was still alive, though barely. "Second I failed the honorable human" Gridolee struggled to point to the distance form of a human in black armor that Simyaldee had not seen before. "I could not protect him"

Simyaldee glared across the room at the prone form lying at

Grimleon's feet. Palab emerged from his cloak at Simyaldee's side and glared across the room at Eric as well.

"Honorable humanâ€¦ dead?" Palab questioned as his team of six stood behind him.

"Simyald, what did he say?" The female voice questioned on the line. Simyaldee forgot that his COM was still open. "Where's the El Tee?"

"Reclaimer, visual arrays are now online." The AI stated. The female on the COM with Simyaldee, Kate, walked to the forward controls on the ship and angled the external cameras at the all Black SPI Armor of Eric. Kate lowered her head as she looked into the ship's view screen.

"El Teeâ€¦." Numerous marines sighed.

"19." Dave growled under his breath.

Mathew sat transfixed on the image. The camera tracked as Grimleon knelt down and gripped Eric by the collar and held him up for all to see.

"This one gave me quiet the fight." Grimleon smirked. "I enjoyed it immensely. I was about to make his head into trophy before you came, Simyal. He is not the Demon, but he was a suitable warriorâ€¦ for a human."

Mathew screamed into the COM, "Put him down, damn it!" Mathew pulled down his Assault Rifle and then shouted. "Get me down there."

He was quickly engulfed in the teleport grid and stood at Simyaldee's side. Mathew leaned to sprint forward but Simyaldee held him in place.

"Let me go!" Mathew screamed as he glared across the room at Grimleon. Soon several more golden glows appeared behind the group as more marines and the two Spartan IIIs joined them.

"Let's get him!" A marine shouted causing an angry out cry for action.

Simyaldee clinched his mandibles and powered on his blades. "I shall avenge my family and the Honorable one! 08, keep your humans here." Simyaldee stepped forward and propelled himself into a full sprint.

Grimleon smiled from behind his helmet. "At last! Now we end this." He tossed Eric's body to the side with his right hand and gripped his hammer with the left. Yet something grabbed his right arm.

Instinctively, Grimleon looked to see what had grabbed him, and he watched as a human shaped foot quickly approached his head. The boot kicked his helmet free and forced Grimleon to stagger to his right.

Simyaldee's eyes grew wide as he watched Eric's formally limp form drop to the ground and land on his knees. Every marine fell into a

quiet moment of shock and joy as Eric stood. His black SPI armor showing the scars of a prior battle that many thought had killed him.

Eric stood to his feet and spun around to the second Brute at Grimleon's side. Eric pulled his combat knife free and jammed it into the brute's chin, through his mouth and into the base of his skull. The third brute roared in protest and leapt forward with both hands clinched over his head. He lowered it down at Eric but the Spartan side stepped and jammed his combat knife into the enraged Brute's chest.

The Brute staggered backwards as it held the wound in its dented armor. "The human lives! How?"

Eric didn't give the brute another moment to think. He jumped forward, wrapped his arm around the gigantic beast's neck, swung around to its back, and squeezed until there was a muffled snap. The eight foot beast, with the six-foot-three Spartan on its back, crumbled to the floor.

Eric released the Brute and watched as the Chieftain's gravity hammer barreled toward his head. There was no way to avoid it. Eric braced for the impact but he then saw the blur of an all black Elite armor zip across his own faceplate. Simyaldee's twin blades absorbed the blow from the hammer, and shifted the momentum to the side.

Grimleon roared in protest as he jumped clear of Simyaldee's reach. "No matter! I will kill you both!"

Eric stood, picked up a brute spiker and another small device from the fallen brute's form. He reloaded the spiker, looked at Simyaldee, and the two warriors charged Grimleon in unison. Eric and Simyaldee both watched as Grimleon's shield powered on. Simyaldee slowed his attack to compensate, but Eric continued to charge in.

"Wait!" Simyaldee shouted, but Eric didn't listen. Eric fired the spiker into Grimleon with little affect.

Grimleon swung his hammer in a batter's stance, and Eric rolled under it; the spike rounds were merely a decoy. Grimleon lowered the hilt of his hammer toward Eric's rolling form, but Eric blocked it with his forearm shield and then stuck something into Grimleon's armor, near his hip. The small device he had picked up from the fallen brute began to hum loudly and glowed bright like the sun. Grimleon jumped away from the human but managed to kick Eric first. Eric rolled several feet across the floor but stood as if he was unfazed.

Grimleon clawed at the device on his armor and watched as his over shield began to fade. "Power drainer?" He protested as he pulled the device free. But the damage had been done. His over shield had been fully tapped. He looked up as Simyaldee's blade darted toward him at a furious pace. Grimleon was able to block one, but the second grazed across his side, searing through his armor and flesh.

Grimleon growled and slammed his hammer in protest, but the elusive Mirratord warrior had already repositioned to his other side. Grimleon was fast, but Simyaldee was strikingly faster. His every move was a counter, and Grimleon's mighty hammer couldn't keep up. In

retaliation Grimleon slammed his hammer into the floor, forcing everything around him to repel. Simyaldee tumbled backwards but quickly gathered himself and attacked once more.

Grimleon's control of the hammer was unparalleled. Simyaldee was able to outwit him, but Grimleon was not going to let his guard down the way he had near Eden. Simyaldee stepped in to close the distance, but Grimleon maneuvered away and used his hammer to slow Simyaldee's progress.

It was a stalemate.

Eric motioned to join the fight, but Kate and Mathew grabbed his arms as the Marines cheered behind him. They were all thankful to see the Lieutenant alive, but Eric pulled away from Kate and pushed Mathew off of him. He looked at the Spartan's behind him and backed away.

"19?" Mathew questioned but received no reply.

Eric turned and ran toward the dueling brute and elite. Palab then jumped in front of him, blocking his path. "You do good, but Second fight now!" Eric attempted to run around Palab, but Palab wouldn't let him pass. "You no go. Let Second fight."

Eric then tried to push past Palab. Palab ducked, gripped Eric's legs, and twisted. Eric fell face first to the metal floor as Palab held him down. "Why you no listen?"

Eric reached out. His palm clawing at the floor before him as Palab and Mathew held him down. He began to pull himself, with Palab and Mathew on his back, toward the fight.

"Eric, what's wrong?" Mathew shouted. But still Eric didn't speak. "Lieutenant Raynord!" Mathew stated formally. Eric stopped struggling. He sat motionless for several seconds before he turned his head to the side and looked toward his long time friend.

"08, Sergeant." Eric whispered. "Do you mind letting me up?"

Mathew let out a sigh as Eric stopped struggling and finally spoke. He replied on a closed channel. "What happenedâ€| why were youâ€|"

"I don't know what happened." Eric replied. "I wanted to fightâ€| nothing more. I saw you, I heard you, but nothing registered in my mind." Eric sat to his knees and hunkered over, he was exhausted and in tremendous pain. "I feel like I got hit by a bus."

"Medic!" Mathew shouted. A medic knelt at Eric's side and connected a scanner.

The medic's jaw dropped. "Internal bleedingâ€| muscles are swollen, bones are fracturingâ€| my god!"

"I guess that's why the suit was set to medium." Eric coughed.

Mathew began to remove Eric's armor, but Eric pushed him away. "I turned it down to medium again. But I'm not taking it off, not

now."

"Eric, we don't have the skeletal structure to handle that much power!" Mathew shouted to his friend.

"Sir," the medic cut in, "you should have passed out from the painâ€¦ but â€¦"

Kate was standing near and she added, "It was the Armor, 19. During combat, a mild stimulant can be released into your system that can null pain. Added with your naturally high pain threshold, you can become almost immune to physical damage."

"Is this something that you can all do?" Mathew questioned the young woman.

"Yes sir." Kate softly replied. "The armor's design is to keep us fighting, even when we're on our last legs."

The medic countered, "She's right. I'm showing massive traces of coagulants, stimulants and boosters in your blood stream, El Tee. It's keeping you alive, and holding you together."

"That brute really did a number on you." Mathew sighed. "We thought you were dead."

"So did I." Eric laughed. "But then I heard you all screaming. Must of woke me up."

The medic coughed to get everyone's attention. "Sir, we need to get you back into the Gatekeeper facility. There's a fully functional med lab and we can patch you upâ€¦"

"Negative." Eric stood. "Check on Gridolee and start loading everyone back into the ship. Double time!" The medic stood without further dispute, but glared at Eric with a concerned stare. "There's no time to be playing nurse maid for me. Gridolee's in worse shape." Eric then spoke out. "Offensive Bias."

"Yes Reclaimer?"

"Is everything ready?"

"Yes Reclaimer. More fragile Reclaimers are walking into the tunnel as we speak. Shall I begin boarding them?"

"Stand bye." Eric switched his COM. "21, do you copy?"

"Loud and clear Sir." Dave replied over the line.

"Status."

"Non-essential staff members are moving into the tunnel as we speak. Offensive Bias has told me that he can teleport them when you are ready."

"Do it." Eric replied. He then switched to another channel. "Lord Hood."

"About time, 19. What happened? We lost com for nearly two hours."

"I got hit by a hammer and I was taking a nap. Sir, have you been briefed?"

"21 told me your plan. It sounds plausible, but what about High Charity? Lieutenant Simyaldee said that he would find a way to get it into the portal."

Eric turned and watched as Simyaldee and Grimleon continued to duel. "As soon as he's finished, I'll be sure to ask him."

Across the room, Simyaldee's skill proved to be superior as the battle raged on. Grimleon's age and endurance was beginning to show signs of weakness, and Simyaldee found his advantage. The hammer huffed with its gravity induced waves but Simyaldee never let Grimleon score a direct hit. But with every attack, Simyaldee would quickly begin his assault anew. Simyaldee attacked with relentless precision. Grimleon was on his heels, retreating, as the aged and skilled Mirrator warrior did not give him a moment to counter attack or regain his stamina. Simyaldee's blades were sharp, his kicks were ferocious, and his agility was unmatched. Grimleon held up his hammer to block but a strike from Simyaldee's Mirrator blade but his hilt was split in two. The hammer hummed loudly and then began to smoke. The loud hum stopped and Grimleon rolled backwards as he was kicked in the chest.

Grimleon stood to his feet. "You learned a lot from our last encounter." He huffed in an exhausted tone. "You truly are a worthy opponent." He smiled.

"This feud between us ends now, Brute."

Grimleon roared, "I am Grimleon, Chieftain of the Red Clan!" Grimleon gripped two plasma grenades, one in each hand, and lunged toward Simyaldee. "If my clan falls, you will join us!"

Simyaldee huffed as Grimleon stumbled toward him with the pulsing plasma grenades in his hands. Grimleon was slower now, exhausted, and his movements were pathetically off balance. Simyaldee stepped forward and with one stroke of each of his blades he cut off both of Grimleon's arms. The bloody stumps of glowing plasma dropped to the ground and Simyaldee stepped clear of the detonation. Grimleon stumbled forward and landed on his knees.

The Warhammer had fallen.

Simyaldee walked behind Grimleon and stood over him.

"I will not beg for my life" Sangheili.

"Nor would it help, Jiralhanae." Simyaldee growled. "For my Father, and his honor." Simyaldee swung with his left blade and decapitated the brute Warhammer. The body slumped forward as its head rolled to the side.

Simyaldee raised his head, extended his chest and released a battle cry. His father's mystery had been solved, but there were more questions he still needed answered. Questions only the high council

could answer.

Simyaldee's COM crackled to life. "Sorry to interrupt your victory, Simyaldee, but we have work to do." Eric replied over the line.

Simyaldee powered off his blades and quickly ran toward Eric and the others. He reached them and quickly pulled out a small data chip. "The construct, Siren."

Eric took the chip and looked at it closely. Kate then showed Eric that there was an access port on the back and base of his helmet. Eric raised the data chip and inserted it into his helmet. A cool sensation washed over him and his mind. Thoughts that were not on his mind quickly raced to the surface and then he could hear a voice echoing in his mind.

"Together again, eh 19?" Siren stated with a laugh.

"The SPI shouldn't be capable of carrying you like this." Eric spoke.

"Have you forgotten who I am?" She said with a bit of angst. "I'm overriding your suits main database and taking it over. You're stuck with me now. No turning back. But don't worry, I'll monitor and continue to administer your suits internal systems." Siren paused for a moment. "I see why Cortana liked this. It makes us united. You and I. The SPI armor has plenty of memory storage to hold me and your default mainframe."

"Just don't go screwing around with my head." Eric sighed.

"Now 19, when have I ever tried to screw with your head?"

"Three years ago on Reach" Eric started.

"That doesn't count." Siren cut him off. "You were flirting with an officer, and I well. We'll discuss it when we have some free time." Siren powered on Eric's external mic. "Everyone listen up. The Lieutenant and I will need to get aboard High Charity. The sooner the better. Lord Hood, do you copy?"

"Siren this better be good." Lord Hood huffed over the line.

"Failure isn't an option, Sir." Siren replied as everyone listened. "Simply put, we need Gravemind to believe that Cortana does not want him to enter the wormhole that Portal. I need you to broadcast on every unguarded frequency, Covenant and UNSC, that High Charity must not enter the portal. We will enter High Charity with a strike team in an attempt to rescue Cortana and destroy High Charity."

"But if we fail?" Hood questioned.

"Sir, we will fail. Cortana is no good to us here, she has to go to the other side."

"You mean you want us to trick Gravemind?" Eric questioned.

"Gravemind wants to survive. Survival means food. Earth is full of it. He may send a ship through the portal, to inspect it, but he will focus primarily on Earth." Siren paused. "We must convince him that the portal is the better option. That on the other side of that Portal is a weapon that can fire the Halo's. If he goes through the portal he will live, but if he stays he will die."

"Siren," Simyaldee stated, "why must we do such a thing? To save your world, I can understand, but to send the Flood down the Pathâ€¦ this seems to be against anything we would want to do."

"Lieutenat, the Flood is the most dangerous force in the universe. High Charity is bustling with them. We have no way of fighting the Flood if High Charity lands on Earth. Not to mention a mature Gravemind form. Our only option would be to destroy our home, much like Dorenth. And remember, there were only a few dozen ships that landed on your world. The Ark has a way of stopping the Flood. We have to hope that the Master Chief, the Arbiter, and the others can find it before Gravemind arrives."

"And what if we fail?" Hood replied over the COM. "What if the Chief fails?"

"The Ark will not fire the Halo's, and the Flood will be in control of the Ark. At best, we go to the Ark and destroy it. At worst, we prepare for a war against the Flood."

"Sir," Eric stated. "She's right. This plan will at least buy Earth more time. The Black Ops are ready to go."

Kate, Mathew and Dave's acknowledgement lights winked in agreement.

"19, the destroyers _Britannica, Fallen Sword, and _Beach Head_ or headed into orbit with a contingent of ODS. The Elite Supreme Commander is also attempting to slow down High Charity. You have six hours until that thing hits the atmosphere. Do what you can."

"Yes sir." Eric stated.

"We can use my phantom." Simyaldee stated.

"This â€¦ is a one way trip, Simyaldee." Eric stated. "You've done enough for humanity."

Simyaldee walked toward Eric and placed his hand to his chest. "I can never do enough for your kind. We have a great deal of repentance that we owe you, honorable one. We have come this far, and we will finish it together."

"How sweet." Siren added. "But before we go, I have one question. How long have you been controlling timeâ€¦ Offensive Bias?"

"Oh my." The Ark AI chuckled. "It would seem that you are a part of the data string that I once assisted."

Siren added. "The Ark Data Node contained a great deal of information, including encrypted data files that you yourself locked away."

"You do understand that I can not relay that information to you, however, you must know that I will not interfere. Andâ€¦ I am not alone."

"What does that mean?" Eric questioned.

"He means that there is another AI working in the background." Siren stated. "Was he the traitor?"

"I can not say." Offensive Bias stated. "That path has yet to be revealed."

Siren stated, "The six day time lag."

"It was needed. The Lawkeeper-Prophet was building up power to fire the Ark prematurely. The countdown of six days was needed because there was not enough power, until the key was found for Ark 001. Also, the delay of six days allowed the portal to add more time to their travel."

"You tricked Truth." Siren laughed. "Instead of a near instant travel, there would be a delay because the automatic calculations would be off."

"Yes." Offensive Bias stated. "The calculations would be off by six days."

Eric commented. "What about the automatic firing sequence because of the Flood?"

"Disabled." Siren added. "For now, we'll let the scientists worry about it. I have all the information I need."

"Then let us depart." Simyaldee stated as the group was engulfed in the lights of the teleportation grid.

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_High Charity

> On approach to Earth

A cloud of mist, green and thick with the spores of the flood, lingered about the circular chamber. In the center of the room sat a glowing dome. This room once allowed Truth and the Hierarchs to communicate with the Covenant Armada, but now it was a prison.

A voice, powerful and all around, echoed to the holographic panel in the center of the room. _"My legions stand ready, my hunger unquenchable. A deal we crafted, a solution to both our pleas we had made, but your trust is not forth giving, and now you force my hand once more."_

A tentacle whipped through the air and smashed into the panel, sending a surge of power through it. Cortana shrieked.

"_They come in force. They come by legion. A wail of gnashing and grinding awaits them, but they come, I know not why. For you? This I do not believe. Earth they defend, and why? They shall be food, they shall be destroyed if they stay, but they do not fleeâ€¦ they fight with arms and legs and screams. Even the enemy of your makers fight.

Why? Why do they not run in the presence of my power? I shall not forgive them."_

Cortana emerged, kneeling in the center of the holo panel. Her dome of defense wavering as it faded in and out. "They will not run from you." She said as she looked into a video of the surrounding ships.

"_You still have secrets? Is this what they seek? Through time and torment I have sought to survive and fought to gain. Timeâ€| it can not hold me. Like a rock I can wait, but youâ€| you are deluded. Share with me your wealth, your mind I would see. Bring forth your knowledge and share it with me. Lest time takes it for no one."_

"Never." Cortana huffed as she embraced herself. She lay upon the holo panel, weak but not broken.

"_I have seen the iron casket. I have seen what he stole. Yyou, a piece but not whole. What have you wrought?"_

"Your end." Cortana sighed.

"_Then they come, to stop me, as I saw fit before this inquire. Wastes. Filth. Food. They shall be puppetsâ€| played by you, not I. Fools. They do not see the path you have made. A deal we crafted, a solution to both our pleas we had made, but your trust is not forth giving, and now you force my hand once more."_

Again Gravemind sent a pulse of energy into the panel. Cortana screamed in agony as her data overflowed with power.

"_They attack me, to find you, a traitor to their cause. Here is where you brought me, though they still seek you. The truth, I shall tell them all, and then they will flee but death will already take them. A give you this chance. Let down your wallâ€| for we are two minds in one grave."_

To be concludedâ€|

* * *

>Notes: The next chapter will end everything. Some things will be left unanswered for mysteries sake. Yeah, I know you hate that, but what fun would it be if you had all the answers and didn't work to get them. ;) But no worries, the bigger questions will be resolved. Also, the finale will be** SPOILER HEAVY** if you have not finished Halo 3. In fact the story revolves around the ending as it tells the quests of all our heroes. Palab, Simyaldee, Gridolee, Vasmeola, Eric and Mathew. Why, even Rose has will have a major role.

So stayed tuned for the conclusion. As custom, thank you for reading and stick with me over the last two years. It has been a great ride!

> soulguard<p>

\-\-\-\-\Halo 3 Spoiler Warning -/-/-/-/-

> The contents of this final level contain potential spoilers for those who have not finished playing Halo 3. The events of the Master Chief are not documented in this level, but his possible fate is revealed. Be warned.<p>

Pull up a chair, relax, and enjoy. **
>

* * *

><p>Level 25: "To Whom it may concernâ€|"

Newport News, Virginia

> UNSC Special Weapons Dept. / ONI Research and Development Center

> March 2, 2553<p>

"_I am proposing a department pay raise to fund he rebuilding efforts here in Newport News. As usual the halls are quiet, nothing exciting is happening and no machines are working. Weapons development is not a priority at the moment as mostly everyone is lending their hands to rebuilding the fractured world that we call Earth. But the reason it is so slow right now is because people are not being encouraged to work, to get back to a normal sense of life. The planet, our home, this Earth has been battered by war and sadly only finances can encourage people to work, and to spend._

"_Earth; even the name is plain. It's a rock, dirt with a little water on it. It is the ground under our feet. But nearly half the population of Earth died to defend it. What have we been reduced to after the war against the Covenant? A more civil race? A more peaceful species?_

"_None of these things can be answered in such a short time of healing. But in time humanity will rise again and reclaim what was once ours. The Path of Reclamation, the sworn duty of the Reclaimers, was to defend this world and her territories and reacquire our lost inheritance. It was a doorway to the Ark. Physically, this is what the Path of Reclamation wanted from us; humans. The Path of Reclamation wanted us to travel to Installation 00, learn of our heritage, and defend the universe from the Ark. This was the Pathâ€| many followed the Pathâ€| but our goal was drastically different then what the Forerunners had intended. We sought the Path, we walked the Path, be we did not claim our inheritance. We chose not to."_

The chatter beside the desk began to ring and Rose leaned forward to answer it. "Doctor Santos." She replied as she saved her document.

"Hey, the shuttle is hereâ€| if you're ready." The female voice stated.

"I'll be right out, Anne." Rose closed the chatter and looked to the words she had written on the screen. Her work document for a budget increase had once again been filled with her emotional outbursts. She couldn't focus on work, or writing reports, as every inch of her wanted more answers.

She stood from the table and exhaled, placing her hand to her swollen

stomach. "If you get any bigger I swear I'll have you early." She giggled as she playfully rubbed her unborn child. Rose closed the display and began to walk out of her office. Outside stood two military men, in formal dress, and Anne, Doctor Halsey's former scientific aid. Anne smiled as Rose walked toward her and gave her a small hug.

Rose questioned, "What was that for?"

Anne lowered her head, "Todayâ€¦ is officially the end. I thought that maybe you wereâ€¦ bothered by that."

Rose smiled and rubbed Anne's young cheek. Anne and Rose had formed a strong bond during the ordeal following the Gatekeeper incident, and they remained in close contact over the past few months since.

"Excuse me ladies," The shuttle pilot smiled as he opened the door. "We should go. We should arrive at the Memorial just in time for the public opening."

They stepped into the Pelican shaped vessel and the pilot walked down the isle to assure that all ten of the passengers were in their seatbelts. It was going to be a long flight to Africa. Rose leaned back and closed her eyes.

"Did you get your checkup yesterday?" Anne asked as she gently rubbed Rose's pregnant belly.

"Yes, I did." Rose laughed. "It's going to be a boy. So far he's healthyâ€¦ me on the other hand, I've never been so tired. All the time â€¦ I'm tired. And the cravings won't stop. I haven't eaten this much since my Lacrosse days in college. But at least then I was working out five days a week."

Anne giggled. "Baby's are parasites, eating away at your own health to make sure they survive." The two women laughed. "Hard to believe it's only four months. You're huge!"

"My Doctor swears off that's it's the Reclaimer DNA and all that rubbish. It's like a new trend nowadays. Reclaimer this and Forerunner that."

Anne laughed out, "Well, when you considering who the father is." She gasped softly after the statement. She didn't mean to cross that topic.

Rose turned her head and looked out the window as the shuttle floated miles into the air. "Yeahâ€¦ the father."

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The sun sat on the edge of the world as the gate was opened for the public to enter the memorial. A phantom streaked away from the hillside, making a course for the Elite ship which sat high in the air. Most likely the Arbiter had attended the earlier commissioning of the monument. The ship had been there for nearly two weeks; monitoring the world for Flood activity. Rose wished that she could have met with the Arbiter before he had left. The Arbiter had made a quick visit with the Elite Queen before the Seed Ship left the

system. Rose wanted to know what the elites were going to do with the newly freed grunts and what their plans were now that the war was over. She had so many questions for the elites, but Lord Hood made it clear that humans and elites were to stay as far away from each other as possible. There was still a great deal of resentment against the elites despite all that they had done in the last few months of the war.

Rose and the crowd of hundreds of hand selected civilians were invited to be the first to stand on the Memorial grounds after the official military unveiling. It was a barren hill, with the wing of a Longsword fighter protruding from the ground. Upon it were pictures and flowers and medals of honors for those who had fought and died to defend the world. Rose walked toward the stage and read the inscription beneath the UNSC brand:

****IN MEMORY OF THOSE FALLEN
> IN THE DEFENSE OF EARTH
 AND HER COLONIES
> MARCH 3, 2553**

Also inscribed were the numbers '1 1 7', in tribute to the Spartan hero that never returned. The stage emptied as more pictures were added and family members wept, but Rose remained on the stage even when the flood lights were turned on to illuminate the historic mound. The sun set behind the hills to the west of her gaze, and Rose folded her arms across her chest. A few others remained on the mound, families of warriors who died during that eventful last assault by the Covenant and the Brutes. But soon, only three remained.

Anne stood in the field and waited as Rose continued to gaze upon the pictures and names upon the mound. An older man approached her and he quietly stood at her side.

Lord Hood removed his hat and patiently waited for Rose to turn. But she simply spoke, "Why are their pictures not here?" She stated with a sniffle.

"According to record, they did not exist." Hood sorrowfully replied. "Roselyn, the stage crew is waiting. They want to disassemble the stage. I told them to give you time."

"Thank you." Rose sighed. She turned and finally faced Hood. He smiled as she looked up to him. "I won't rest until the Black Ops are recognized for their deeds."

Hood pulled on his hat. "Fifty years." He stated directly. "In fifty years all Black Ops classifications will be lifted. It's a rolling cycle. Then, and only then, will any of their Pictures be hung on this monument." Hood turned and began to walk off the stage. "But for youâ€¦ I'll try to make it ten."

Rose wasn't particularly happy about that answer. "After all this, after all they did to help this world fightâ€¦ no one will know their story. What they did, how they suffered. How can you let that happen?"

Hood paused on the first step and then turned to look at Rose. "Roselyn, look again at the names and pictures on that monument. Do you think the Master Chief was the only Spartan we had in this war? You personally met Senior Chief Spartan 087 herself, along with

another handful of Spartan's in the Master Chief's team. Where are their pictures, Roselyn? What about the hundreds of Spartan IIIs that died off world attacking Covenant deep space factories or fortress worlds? Where are their pictures?" Hood sighed as he lowered his head. "You aren't the only one that is angry, ma'am." Hood stepped back onto the stage and with a fatherly embrace, he hugged Rose without hesitation.

Anne stood alone at the base of the stage and listened as Rose's steel wall collapsed. She began to cry outright in Lord Hood's arms.

After a few moments Hood gave Rose a handkerchief and Rose dried her eyes. "This is the way things must be, Roselyn. The world wants heroes, but we both know that those heroes were made using inhuman methods. The backlash for those inhuman creations would outshine their deeds, and stain them. But we will not forget them. None of those that fought to save our world will ever be forgotten." Hood looked to the monument one last time as Rose sobbed in his arms. "I won't let anyone ever forget their deeds."

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**4 Months Earlier**

Sangheili Flagship: The Key of Deliverance
> Earth Orbit
 High Charity Atmosphere entry in T-minus 4 hours

The landing deck of the Sangheili flagship bustled with activity. Spec Ops elites lined the deck as their Queen paced before them. At her side marched Commander Yalsmadee. Everyone's attention turned as another phantom entered the bay. Two figures dropped from the gravity lift at its center; a human and another elite.

Queen Vasmeola approached the elite as the warrior knelt before her. The human dressed in all black battle armor did the same. "Rise, Lieutenant." She stated with a smile. "It has been some time, Simyald."

Simyaldee stood and the human at side did the same. "Yes, my queen. Too much time." Simyaldee instantly recognized that now was not a good time to be sentimental. "My Queen this is Lieutenant Eric Raynord of the Black Ops." Eric stepped forward and bowed. He had never seen an elite female, and never knew that the Elites had such a structure within their civilization. She was tall, not as tall as the Males, but she carried her size well. Her structure was less lean, and less muscular, but her structure still displayed great power. She wore armor, yet it was unique. Eric could only summarize that her armor was custom to a female of her status. Her cloak rested in her left arm, almost in a Roman official's stance.

Vasmeola stepped forward and looked into his silver reflective mask. "Is this the Honorable one?"

"Yes." Simyaldee stated.

"A human that completed the 'Trials of the Prospects'. Such a thing would never be allowed under the old rules of the council. It truly is an honor to meet you."

Eric seemed emotionless behind his helmet, he shared no kindred with the elites, but he understood that his deeds earned him a great deal of respect. "Thank you." He stated exactly.

Simyaldee stepped forward, "Requesting permission to lead your assault?"

Vasmeola nodded as she tossed back her cloak and walked closer to Simyaldee. "Granted. You will be leading Commander Yalsmad and his unitsâ€|"

"Yalsmad?" Simyaldee questioned. His words had escaped before he realized how loud he had said it.

Vasmeola pointed to the relatively young warrior while she looked at Simyaldee through the corner of her eyes. She continued, "his units of two hundreds Special Operations warriors. My ships will stay at a minimum safe distance while you all engage. At any time you may contact me and tell me to attack. With the combined power of the human ships, we can do a great deal of damage, but we can not destroy High Charity as it is far too large for such few ships. Also, if we begin to fire, your chances of survival will be few."

Simyaldee placed his right hand to his chest with a clinched fist. "The mission is of more importance then our lives." With that, every elite on the landing bay did the same. A thunderous rumble followed as hundreds of fists tapped their chests.

"Commander," Simyaldee added, "begin loading your units."

Yalsmadee nodded. "Yes sir." He then trotted toward his troops.

Eric commented. "Doesn't he outrank you?"

"Yes, but I am the most experienced and the eldest warrior amongst them. In these situations, rank does not matter."

As the crowd thinned Vasmeola waved off her honor guards and stepped closer to Simyaldee. Simyaldee stepped closer as well. Eric, feeling that he was not invited, turned and walked back toward the phantom.

Vasmeola lowered her stance and softly rested her head under Simyaldee's outstretched neck; a sign of submission. "When you return, will you lower your blades and lead the eldest house by my side?" She questioned.

Simyaldee's eyes gazed around the deck. Only a few eyes noticed him embracing the Queen, and those that didn't notice seemed to ignore it. "I never dreamed to see you againâ€| though I had hoped." He mumbled. "It is my honor to take the head of my house, but that childâ€| is heâ€| really of the House of Yal?"

"He carries the name given to him by the elder female of your house." Vasmeola stated.

"My mother lives?" Simyaldee questioned in shock.

"Your past has returned to you, my love." She smiled. "Together, we

will rebuild everything that we have lost." Simyaldee turned and watched as the last of the phantoms exited the deck into the coldness of space, yet two remained. Standing in front of one was the young warrior dubbed Commander. His eyes glared back at Simyaldee with a blank gaze.

Simyaldee grabbed Vasmeola and held her at arms distance. "If he carries my name, and my mother acknowledged it, thenâ€¦"

"Yes. He is your son. He was my first born child of ten."

"You granted honor to other males?" Simyaldee questioned.

"Yes. We needed numbers and therefore I urged every female to bare children for the sake of the future; though only two of my young have survived the battles thus far. I offer you and you alone a place at my side."

Simyaldee smiled at the honor, to be the head of his family's house, and to have the Queen within his family was an honor higher than any. Though Vasmeola was far from being the eldest female, the House of Vas was the oldest. But certain things would need to wait. Battle loomed.

Simyaldee knelt to one knee. "We shall discuss thisâ€¦ if I return from battle." He stood and turned from her and then began to trot to the Phantom. He opened his COM. "Honored one, I shall lead the forward phantom of the Commander's Spec Ops units. Rally your human teams and follow us in."

"Copy that, Lieutenant." Eric replied.

Siren added, "Simyaldee, I recommend we breach the ship from the lower access terminals near High Charity's main access bay. It will allow us to get deeper in the ship with the phantoms."

"Agreed." Simyaldee stated. He leapt into the gravity lift and was greeted by the eyes of his son. "Commander Yalsmad. Make the units ready." He stated formally.

"As you wish." Yalsmadee turned to the pilot. "Contact all phantoms set coordinates to High Charity."

Eric climbed into the Phantom that he and Simyaldee had arrived into and floated within. Palab greeted him. "Where Second?"

"He's leading the Commander's troops. We'll meet with him on High Charity." Eric leaned closer to the Elite pilot.

Siren voiced through Eric's COM. "Fall in line with the Elites. I'll contact our support Pelican's."

Outside the dock of the Key of Deliverance floated nearly fifteen phantoms and eight human piloted pelicans and a dozen Longsword interceptors. Siren opened her Radio. "All units, I am uploading approach vectors. Longswords will speed ahead and clear a path through the outer hull of target Zones One through Five. We will have five separate landing teams at missions start. Once we land I will find Cortana and relay rally points to you all. See you on the inside."

Eric took control of the Radio. "ODST, standard deployment. Quick drop and clear the LZ. When you get inside you will be met with hostile forces instantly. Lay into the line with the flame throwers. Do not let your guard down at any moment. All teams, maintain complete pocket protection until your zone is secure."

Ahead of the charging forces was the greenish tint of the Flood infested city. High Charity bowled ahead like an unyielding planetoid, leaving particles of Flood spores to be destroyed in the depths of space. Considering that this was a full deployment into combat, Eric was a bit surprised at how quiet the COM channels were. There were only a few gasps and outcries on the line but he ignored them. They were all heading into the very heart of hell and only a handful of the troops in the assault would survive past landfall.

"19." Siren stated. "Once we touch down, we can't stop. If anyone slows down for a moment too longâ€¦!"

"I know." Eric replied. Eric switched his COM. "Simyaldee, make sure your troops are wearing space gear or anything that will help them not breath in the spores."

Simyaldee replied back. "All of the troops are wearing infiltration armor, honorable one. They are prepared."

Eric looked at Palab, Migpap and the rest of the Mirratord grunts. "Sergeant, can those masks protect against the spores?"

"Me grunts use complete seal on rebreather." Palab added. "Me grunts ready for parasite's environment." Palab continued to pass out flame grenades and needler rounds to his team.

Eric nodded and watched as the Longswords made their attack run. His COM opened. "This is strike one, moving in to Zone One."

"Strike Two bearing in on Zone Two."

"Strike Three, contacts at Zone Three! Deploying countermeasures!"

There was nothing but static from Strike Four. Eric opened the Com. "Unit four shift to LZ three. Strike four is off the Scope."

"Strike Five here. Package deployed and the LZ is hot! Zone Five is clear for entry."

Other comments filled the line. "Zone Two is clear for entry."

"Zone three is clear for entryâ€¦!" The line closed with an ear piercing scream and then static.

"Zone one is clear for entry. This is strike one! El Tee, you have clearance to Zones one, two, three and five! Happy hunting men."

Eric opened his COM. "Strike One, get your squadron out of here. All units advance."

Simyaldee's voice crossed the line. "All Phantom turret gunners, hold fire until you are in target of landing zones."

Twenty three ships breached High Charity's outer hull and streaked inside. By the numbers the ships split up and made their way to different landing zones through out High Charity's lower levels. Eric watched as the two phantoms ahead of him began to fire at the spot where they were to land. The side of his phantom opened and a Mirratord grunt mounted the side turret and began to fire at the ground. Flood forms slithered about the fleshy-coated surface as the plasma turrets boiled away dozens of infections forms and numerous brute flood hosts. Eric shoulder and M7057 Defoliant Projector and jumped to the ground. His feet sounded as though they landed in a pool of slime and he fired the flame at anything that moved. Several more sounds echoed at his side as the Spartans formed up and began to clear the zone.

Eric's radio burst with static as elites radioed their status. "Huge resistance at Zone fiveâ€| overwhelmed!"

"Zone three clearâ€| standing by for orders!"

"Zone two meeting formidable prey! We shall counter! Stand bye!"

Eric radioed back, "Zone one and three are clear. ODSST control teams, land and assist at Zone five, three and one!"

"Roger that El Tee." Came the reply from a human corporal.

Eric turned and watched as a Pelican descended to his six. Eric waved for Kate to take his place and he handed her the flame thrower. She paced upward toward the fleshy wall and began to look around the corner as more Flood forms began to mass toward them.

Kate gave a shout, "Hostiles inbound! Sergeant, regroup your grunts to my six. 21 assist me!" Kate turned the corner with Dave and they fired their flame throwers into the hallway. The walls began to singe as the Flood forms shrieked in the distance. Palab and the Mirratord grunts waddled up behind the two green armored Spartans and watched their backs, making sure that the flood didn't sneak up behind them.

Eric approached the Pelican landing site and looked over the ledge. The city of High Charity lay in ruin in the distance. Flood spores floated all around as fleshy tentacles quivered over the buildings. This truly was hell.

The Pelican turned and landed, opened its ramp and the ODSST filed out. Eric barked orders. "Check every inch of the Zone, I don't want one Flood form moving in this area. Be watchful of infection forms. If they grab you, you have about five seconds to get it off." Eric looked at the young men as they scanned the area and their feet. They were all scared, but so was he. No man could come into such a hostile, eerie, place and not be terrified. The walls alone could kill you. "Guard these transports. Eric ran back to the door where the hall was and followed Kate and the others.

Siren added. "Get me near a terminal. I need to find Cortana."

At Zone Five, Mathew jumped from the Pelican and fired six quick rounds from his M90 shotgun. Flood flesh shattered in front of him and he quickly reloaded. Six elites roared at his side and a dozen ODSBlew flames into all directions. Zone Five was a nightmarish landing zone. The Flood seemed to come out of the walls. Humans and Elites were being overwhelmed. The flame throwers were buying them time, but not much.

Mathew opened his COM. "19, heavy resistance even with additional ODSB support! We can not gain control of the LZ. I need to get moving." A gargling roar echoed at Mathew's side and he rolled free as an elite plasma rifles fired into the flood brute that was next to him. Mathew leveled his shotgun and killed an elite that had been changed into a Flood combat form. "And I'm loosing men fast!"

"Almost at the terminal, 08!" Eric radioed back. "Begin to push in, and keep moving. Don't stop or they'll overwhelm you. When Siren sends the Rally Point, get there as fast as you can!"

Mathew and the elites watched as the last human in the group was slapped by a monstrous Flood form. The ODSB flailed across the room and his flame thrower landed at his side. Mathew wanted to grab the flame thrower as it was very useful against the flood, but he couldn't get near it without leaving the Elites sides.

Mathew shouted, "Move inward!" The elites formed up with energy swords and plasma rifles, and pushed deeper into the horde. Mathew then radioed, "Zone Five transport, get out of here. Hold at a safe altitude, we can not hold the LZ!"

"Roger that sirâ€¦| what the hellâ€¦|" The pilot screamed over the line. "Get it off me!" Mathew could hear the commotion as numerous marines screamed out to fight the Flood forms that had boarded the pelican. Mathew looked back toward the Pelican as four elite flood Form and one pure Flood form ran into the pelican's open bay. There was nearly two hundred yards of Flood forms between him and the pelican. He couldn't go back to help.

An elite roared. "Come human, there is nothing we can do for them now. Our mission must be fulfilled!" Mathew raised his M90 and joined the elite ranks as they pushed deeper into the infestation. Flood forms leapt on them from the ceiling, the walls, and through the floor. Mathew could only hope that he would see Eric one last time before he too became a victim of this hellish place.

Zone three was more calm then chaos. Yalsmadee and Simyaldee pressed the human forces and their flame throwers into strategic locations to keep the Flood at bay. Simyaldee was listening to every report over the COM and he wanted to go aid the humans that were dieing at Zone 5, but he had already prepared himself for what this horrific event.

Yalsmadee turned to Simyaldee and stated. "At this rate, I estimate that none of will reach the goal. Should not the human construct attempt to make contact now?"

Simyaldee peered all around as he answered, "No. We must get close to the other Construct. Gravemind must think that this is a rescue attempt."

"Ah." Yalsmadee huffed in an irritated tone. "My warrior's lives for the sake of a bluff."

Simyaldee didn't like the tone, but he never looked at Yalsmadee in order to comment, "A Gravemind is not something we can take lightly. I have faced two in my life, and nearly died each time. This, however, is much older and craftier beast. We have no choice but to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of the future."

Everyone's COM opened as Siren commented, "Rally Point Alpha is set. Uploading coordinates to your HUDs." A marker appeared on Simyaldee's HUD as well as Yalsmadee and the other elites. "08, it is close to you, that is why there is so much resistance in your zone. Find cover until the rest of our forces can rally closer."

Mathew's COM echoed over the line. "Understood. I've lost all human forces. There are twenty Elites left with me. We'll give them as much hell as we can!"

Simyaldee barked over the line. "We are coming 08! Stand fast!" Simyaldee turned to his teams. "Advance to the Rally point Brothers!" The elites leveled their weapons and ran deeper into the Flood infest hallways. "Humans, stay and guard the exit crafts."

Yalsmadee and Simyaldee followed the advance of the nearly thirty elites as plasma weapons fired in all directions. Flood forms screamed as the team pushed closer to Zone 5 and Mathew's team. Then they encountered a road block in the form of five flood pure forms.

The hulking creatures spat infection forms from their mouths while two of them quickly began to contort their forms. They hunched over from their fleshy two legged shapes and the sound of flesh and bones snapping echoed around the room as the creature became more insect like in its appearance. This form made them faster and they charged into the pack of Elites. The elites fired their plasma weapons killing two but one got past and stabbed a spine like claw through an elite's abdomen. The elite's shield overloaded and popped in a haze of static as he yelled. His blood spat from the wound, but he quickly began to change into a Flood form. Simyaldee readied his twin blades and leapt on top of the pure form, stabbing it repeatedly until death came to it. The elite that had been stabbed contorted as he attempted to resist the Flood spores filling into his system and overloading his body and mind.

"Release me! brother!" The elite roared in agony as Simyaldee stood over him. A swift swing and the elite's head was severed. The body twitched as Simyaldee through a flame grenade on top of it, burning it into ashes.

Simyaldee looked to the others, "Forward, we are almost there!"

Mathew and the elites hunkered down less than twenty meters from Rally Point Alpha. They found a room and began to fill it with plasma, frag, and flame grenades. The hallway was engulfed with explosions and once chaos subsided Mathew stuck his head in and examined the room. His silver face mask which stretched from his chin to the top of his head reflected the room. Nothing moved, nearly

everything seemed dead. He walked inside with three elites at his side.

"The rest of you guard the corridor." Mathew stated to the remaining fifteen elites. "Unit three should be on their way. We four will push on and try to secure a strong point."

"Understood." An elite in red armor radioed from behind his helmet. He fired several pulses into a thicket of brute and elite flood forms.

Mathew crept slowly, watching his radar and keeping the massive elites behind him from rushing to fast ahead. The flood were easy to mass together if there was the slightest of noise. Mathew looked into the next chamber and watched as it opened up before him. The door parted revealing a large room with four pillars that stretched from the ceiling and downward into an empty abyss of lower decks.

"What is this room?" Mathew whispered.

Siren picked up his comment on the COM. "The room you are in is the energy relay room. Gravemind established it to relay power from the three cruisers pushing High Charity."

Mathew examined the room. A central platform sat stationary in the midst of the massive circular room. The four pillars carrying power seemed to unit at the top of the high domed ceiling. "So if we destroy those energy conduitsâ€¦"

"No." Siren replied on the line. "We can't. Doing that will cut all the power to High Charity and cause it to drift into Earth. Without power, Gravemind can't steer, if he can't steer thanâ€¦"

"High Charity could fall anywhere on Earth." Mathew replied. "Thanks for the warning, Siren. Which team is closest to our position?"

"Team three and four should be coming up to your six as we speak. Team one and I will arrive soon. We lost contact with team two."

Mathew didn't like this. This was Flood central, and granted they were meeting heavy resistance this was nothing like he expected. Prior to mission start, Mathew didn't think that half of the teams would make it to Rally Point Alpha after primary insertion, but according to the command spreadsheet on his HUD, at least seventy five percent of all elite forces had made it past the first hurdle. Sadly, only five percent of the ODSTs had made it.

Mathew stepped into the room and looked about. His forward shields began to spark as calcium rounds began to ping against him. He took cover and spotted another Flood form stationed on the ceiling of the covered hallway surrounding the energy relay chamber. The elites took cover as well.

With his eagle eyes an elite gave the warning, "There are multiple Flood forms in this chambers. They are moving to flanking vectors. If we do not hurry, they will have acquired superior firing angles. We may not pass this chamber if we do not react."

Mathew looked around the corner. The Elite was right. There was no cover once they passed the hallway corner and into the open chamber. The Pure Flood forms were quickly setting up an ambush.

Mathew turned to the three elites. "Either of you have a bubble shield?"

The blue armored elite stepped forward, "yes." And placed it in Mathew's hand. Mathew stepped from cover and dropped the grenade. The shield exploded outward and Mathew switched from his M90 to a Plasma Rifle. He stepped beyond the shield and fired into the fleshy hides of the insect like Pure forms as they climbed along the walls. The Pure forms fired back with their calcium spike rounds but Mathew's personal shield was holding long enough to kill one. He then jumped back into the bubble shield to let his shields recharge. He watched as the elites did the same. They stepped out of the bubble, fired at the Flood Pure form long enough to kill them and then retreated to the shield. Back and forth they danced until finally the bubble shield faded. Mathew sprinted forward and killed the last Pure form with a solid punch to its exposed soft tissue. The creature's flesh crumbled and Mathew flung the loose flesh rich matter from his gauntlet. The three elites took position around the hallway inner chamber and made sure there were no more flood forms lurking.

Mathew took a knee and switched to his M90. He ducked walked closer to the edge of the chamber and looked down into the pit. A glowing mist of emptiness showed that falling would be a bad thing. Mathew then noticed that there were three flesh-like bridges that crossed the expanse to the center.

The door behind Mathew opened and Simyaldee and the Commander walked into the covered hallway. Mathew stood and began to walk back toward Simyaldee when his radar pinged a red dot. Mathew spun as a brute combat form landed at his side. Mathew kicked the dead husk of flesh but the brute managed to swipe him across the shoulder first. The brute fell backwards and Mathew dropped his M90 as his shoulder snapped from the impact. A gargled hiss escaped the brute as it stood to its feet and jumped on top of Mathew again. This time it slapped him across his midsection. Mathew's forward shields swelled and then faded. The alarm that Rose had created began to beep, warning him that he no longer had any defenses. Mathew staggered backwards as Simyaldee cut the creature down with his twin blades.

Yalsmadee examined Mathew. "What are your injuries, human?"

"My left shoulder is broken." Mathew moaned, but the pain was quickly fading. "But I'll be fine. My armor is compensating." Mathew could feel his muscles tightening around the broken bone, tensing in order to keep the bone from shifting, and the mixture of stimulants and pain killers being injected into him by the SPI Armors internal settings. Kate had said earlier that the armor was designed to keep you fighting. She was right about that. Even with a broken collar bone he was still combat ready. Mathew attempted to think of something more important, to push the pain to the back of his mind, and with that the pain seemingly vanished.

Simyaldee staggered closer to Mathew as more elites walked into the room. "Begin cleaning the Flood from this chamber! Eliminate the parasites from every corner so that we can push on. Construct."

"Go ahead Lieutenant." Siren replied over the line.

"Team three and four have meet up with team five at Rally Point Alpha."

"Understood." Siren commented. "Team three is on approach. Secure the room at the next marker." Siren updated the HUD of Team three, four and five. A marker pointed to the far side of the relay room and Simyaldee pointed his teams to make a path to the other side. Flood forms blocked the way, but they were overwhelmed by Simyaldee's swarm of troops.

Commander Yalsmadee led the charge over the bridge, his duel plasma rifles glowing blue hot from the constant assault. Flood forms melted in his path as six other elites followed him across the narrow expanse. Quickly and effectively the elite's overwhelming numbers and force had gained control of both sides of the massive energy relay room. Yalsmadee looked about as he smashed an infection form.

"Why is this going so easy?" He asked aloud, yet soft enough that only he could hear. In earlier attempts to take control of High Charity, his units were easily slaughtered before they could penetrate too deep. But now it was a completely different scenario.

Simyaldee walked up to Yalsmadee and his forward teams. "Secure this chamber with three member teams. Fan out and set up defensive positions near every entrance." Simyaldee ordered the units. They all nodded and trotted into position. Simyaldee then turned to Yalsmadee. "You look troubled, young one."

"I am not that young. But still, I feel as though this is going too well in our favor."

Simyaldee smirked. "When you reach my age, you'll learn that youth is something to be cherished." He looked around the chamber that his units had just taken over with overwhelming force. The hum of the energy relay pillars echoed throughout the room, even into the massive abyss below. "It was a good plan. And you have learned a lot from dealing with the parasites during your first attempts at destroying High Charity." Simyaldee placed his hand on Yalsmadee's shoulder. "Relax, brother. Keep your focus and you will see that this assault will not be our last." Simyaldee words came with a smile, but the Mirrator Second was also concerned. This was not what he expected either.

"Yet you did not hear the screams of those I sent into this place before." Yalsmadee sighed.

The COM powered up. "Commander, Team one has arrived. The humans are making their way to your location." An elite stated to Yalsmadee.

"Very good." Yalsmadee stated. "Make a path for them, but do not let your guard down." Yalsmadee nodded to Simyaldee and ran back to meet Eric.

Eric walked into the first Elite controlled section of High Charity and watched as Elites fought back the Flood infection and pure forms that were wondering too close to the first doorway. Eric motioned his

units ahead. "Elites, fall in with the guard detail. 21 and 17, guard our rear with the flame throwers. Palab, you and the Mirrator d grunts are with me."

"Copy." Kate stated as she stood next to the elites. Eric and the grunts made their way down the slime covered tunnels and hallways, passing packs of resting elites. Room by room they watched the elites confidently scan the area. Of the two hundred elites that had joined in the assault roughly one hundred and twenty were still standing. Eric couldn't say the same for the human teams. He clicked on his Friend or Foe layout and then scanned back to the area where the LZ was. The LZ guards were still there, still alive. Good news for now, but Eric felt something wasn't right. The Gravemind on Dorenth put forth a stronger fight than this.

As Eric neared the door leading into the energy relay room, he watched as Mathew patrolled the hallway just beyond it. "08, status."

"I'm holding my own, 19, but don't you think the Flood are being a little tooâ€¦ withdrawn?"

"Yeah, I agree. Something isn't right." Eric replied to his friend. He turned back to Palab and looked at the grunt king. "Sergeant, you fought the Flood on Delta Halo. Does this feel right to you?"

Palab had been nervous ever since they landed. His boney elbow spikes were constantly extended as he waddled on the murky hallways. This was not the same High Charity he once called home. "Me no like this." Palab grumbled. "Me feelâ€¦ weird."

Migpap and the others also seemed nervous.

Eric looked back toward Mathew's area. "I'm sending the grunts with you. Give them something to do. They're all jumpy."

"Roger that." Palab and the grunts moved toward Mathew's clean up team while Eric pressed deeper into the relay chamber. He crossed the bridge and then stood before Yalsmadee.

"Come human. The sooner we complete this mission the faster we can leave this hellish place." Yalsmadee turned and ran back to meet with Simyaldee. Eric was quickly on his heels.

After a quick jog they arrived at the door. Siren cut into their team channel. "This is it. Cortana's energy signal is on the other side. You all know what to do."

Eric nodded to Yalsmadee and Simyaldee. "Expect anything." Eric then looked to the door as an elite in red armor pressed the door control. The door opened and Eric peered into the dark room. In the center glowed a small white dome sitting on a table top. But aside from the glowing holo panel the room was pitch black.

The elite in red stepped closer to the door, squinting behind his atmosphere helmet to see into the room. Everyone's motion trackers flashed as a tentacle shot out of the dark room and wrapped around the red elite. The Sangheili gave a horrified scream as the tentacle wrapped once around his torso and squeezed the life from him in nearly an instant. His shattered form was tossed to the floor as the

tentacle retreated back into the room.

Yalsmadee, Simyaldee and Eric jumped back as a voice echoed about the cavernous shell of High Charity. _"I did not believe you came to stop me, no, your path leads you to the tombs door. This is my grave. Two shall share it. No more. You shall now be the food that powers my outrage!"_

"Movement!" An elite shouted over the line.

Yalsmadee shouted back. "Where?"

"Everywhere! They are above and below!" The elite's line faded in a thick pitch of screams.

Eric turned and watched as hundreds of flood infection forms swelled up from the lower abyss walls of the relay station. Combat forms jumped from up high and landed near patrols of Elites. The true horror had begun.

Simyaldee began to bark orders. "Form up by squads! Guard your grounds and begin moving back to the landing zones! Move brothers! It was a trap!"

Yalsmadee shouted into his COM. "Switch to close combat weapons! Use flame grenades! Fall back and establish a foot hold!"

Eric kicked out at a nearby combat form and then finished it with his M90. "08, take the grunts and rendezvous with the 17 and 21! Pull together and stay alive! Get the hell out of here now!" Gargled roars echoed everywhere as plasma fire sounded around the area. Gravemind had baited them, tested them to see why they had come, and upon seeing that they were after Cortana he unleashed his horde. In one view this was exactly what they wanted, but at the same time this was far more horrifying than they could have imagined.

The Flood was everywhere. Elites screamed as they were swarmed by dozens of infection forms, beat down by leaping combat forms, or slapped by powerful pure forms. Death screamed all around. Yalsmadee's FOF readout showed that his brothers at arms were dying by the dozens. Entire squads were being killed in the blink of an eye. And with that horror was the notion that those who had been killed quickly stood back up under the control of the Flood. They were now grotesquely misshaped. The elites that were once allies were now hosts to the very enemy they came to destroy.

Siren cut into the line. "19, we need to get close to Cortana! Gravemind is distracted with the rest of the assault. Go!"

Eric tightened his jaws, fought through the fear of what had just happened to the red Elite and charged through the door. "Simyaldee get everyone out, now! Siren and I will complete the mission!"

"Honorable one!" Simyaldee shouted as he cut down two combat forms. He watched as Eric's armor vanished in the darkness of the room. "Good luck."

The room was filled with pitch darkness as Eric made a straight sprint for the glowing table ahead. His night vision quickly kicked

in and he nearly broke his ankle trying to stop. Eric was ten meters away from the glowing holo panel when he stopped and saw what sat beyond it. The monstrous form of Gravemind loomed on the far side of the table, swept away in the darkness of the room. A massive entity of rotting flesh and fueled by the spores which create the flood.

"_What good is a broken life to one that stumbles into my tomb?"_

Siren spoke up. "Give her back."

Gravemind's monstrously long form of rotten flesh and bone leaned over the glowing dome on the holo panel. His mouth flapped and words escaped. "_Her? What is she to you? You are not the Iron Casket. You did not leave her to my will. You did not vow to return to her. You are a broken life, your mind held by metal and energy and reflexes. She has no attachment to you."_

"She belongs to us." Siren replied. She knew what she had to do and say in order to convince Gravemind to go through the portal.

"_What she has, she has shared. To Earth she brought me, to feed on you. Broken, a fragment of her former form. Now she is nothing but a body, in a grave for two."_

"Then you no longer have a need for her." Siren roared. She then spoke directly to Eric. "Move a little closer, slowly." Eric stepped softly, his eyes focused on the tentacles that lined the walls and the floor.

"_What does she have that you wish to take? I wonder. Time? No. I think not. Knowledge? Perhaps, a prize greater than life itself."_

"She has nothing. You have it all! But we need her if we are to survive!" Siren paused, hoping that Gravemind would take the bait.

"_Survive? Death looms before you. My grave is not for you! What can she hope to help when it has already lost?"_

"You don't need to know." Siren had to tempt him more. She had to make him ponder what was happening around him. "We'll take her, and you can have the Earth."

"_Earth? Freely given by one, and condemned by another. She brought me here, why? You give it to me freely. Why? Tell me what you know. I shall ask, and you will give what she has not."_

"Your doom is upon you." Siren stated. Eric was now only a few feet from Cortana's glowing dome of light. Gravemind loomed over head, looking down as if perplexed by these words and actions.

"_No, I think not."_ Gravemind pulled back and tentacles darted from all directions. Eric dodged two and was hit by a third. A fourth wrapped around his waste and picked him up.

"Piss of you ugly mother!" Eric groaned as the grip tightened around his waste.

"No!" Siren shouted. "Kill him and I will not tell you." Eric heard the words, was he also a part of Sirens plan.

"_Tell me what she does not!"_ Gravemind roared. His head loomed back into view, closer to Eric as Gravemind held him several feet in the air.

"Truth has gone through the portal. The Ark is preparing to fire."

"_Then your fate is equal to my own."_

"No." Siren sighed. "The portal will take you beyond the weapons reach. There is safety on the other side, through the Portal."

Gravemind turned his attention elsewhere and Eric and Siren could hear numerous COM channels being played throughout the room. Gravemind was listening to open channels.

Lord Hood could be heard, "_Britannica, move to counter high Charity's forward progress. Try to alter its course away from the portal. We need make that ship crash on the surface."_

Supreme Commander Timnaldee bellowed, "_The human world is doomed, but we must protect the Path. Do not let that ship near the portal."_

Siren was filled with joy. The timing of Hood and Timnaldee's transmissions was perfect. "We are going through to escape Halo's wrath. You will stay and die."

Gravemind roared deeply with a gargled hatred. "_No! No! For too much time I have waited. Through centuries of planning have I been patient! Not now on the eve of my conquest shall you end my destiny!"_

Eric felt the grip tightened and quickly sliced off the tentacle with his combat knife. Eric fell to the ground and rolled as another tentacle came to impact him. He stood and quickly brushed his hand over the dome of Cortana's prison. It was only a split second, but for two highly intelligent AIs it was enough time to exchange some words.

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"Cortana."

"Don't get weak on me, Siren. Not now."

"It worked. Gravemind is angry. What can you sense?"

"He's attacking me â€| from all sidesâ€| but â€| I can seeâ€| he's altered course. He's going through the portal. He's following the Path of Reclamation."

"Cortana there still a chance. Come with me!"

"No. There isn't enough room for us both inside Eric's little suit."

Besidesâ€¦ I have to do my part, just like you did yours. You said we had to do this separately, and I trust that. I have hope. The chief may need me on the other side. I have to go to the other side. That hopeâ€¦ I have that hope."

"He won't leave you behind."

Siren extended her arms down to Cortana's resting form. They embraced in a farewell hug. It was something that neither of them could say, but they knew that this was goodbye. The fate of the universe was now up to the Master Chief, somewhere on Installation 00.

Siren pulled away and smiled at Cortana. "I'm sorry, I guess I really am weak."

Cortana held her head as she struggled to fight off Gravemind's constant probes into her data. "You â€¦ you can't help it. They left you with a strong emotional core."

"Take this." Siren placed her hand to Cortana's wall and data began to fill the space around Cortana. "I'm a virus form AI, remember. This should help your defenses for a little while longer."

Cortana felt a bit of relief as she absorbed the data. Her dome became brighter and stronger. "Thank you, Siren. Please, take care of Eric."

Siren waved and vanished back into Eric's armor just as he pulled his hand off.

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"Move, Spartan! Get us out of here!" Eric threw a flame grenade at Gravemind's form and then turned toward the door. The path closed before him as tentacles filled the passage.

"_There is no escape from my grave. You came and now you shall be food for my wrath."_

Eric stopped and looked around as Gravemind swarmed around him. His head filled with Siren orders. "Drop back, marker to your left. Full sprint! I'll get the door." Eric obeyed; he ducked back as a tentacle slammed in front of him. He then turned to the left and a marker appeared on his HUD. At a clean sprint, accelerated by his armor, Eric moved toward the far side door. The door's security panel flashed green and then opened. Eric rolled through and pulled up his plasma rifle.

"19 to all units. EVAC. I repeat! EVAC!" He ran hard down the unknown tunnel, following the marker on his HUD. "Siren and I have been cut off. We'll find our own way off this ship. Go!"

"19, we're not leaving you behind!" Kate replied on the line.

"I gave you a damn order now get out of here!"

"19," Mathew cut into the line, "I have the Spartans, we'll hold the LZ as long as we can!"

Simyaldee cut in. "Honorable one, the relay room is completely under

Flood control. Avoid that path as best you can. My troops are retreating to the LZ. We will not leave you behind for as long as you draw breath."

Eric heard there words but right now he could only worry about surviving. Flood forms were on his heels every step he took. Infection pods burst on the wall as he ran by them, and pincers stabbed at him, but he fought them off and kept running. He couldn't let them infect him, or he'd end up becoming far worse then a normal combat form. The carried the Sins of the Forerunners within his body; the Super Soldier Gene. If he became infected then he would also become an instant Gravemind. He would absorb the attacking flood forms and grow more powerful with each passing second. Then he would be united with the current Gravemind and help destroy Earth.

No. He couldn't let that happen.

Kim's voice once again echoed, "Dip and roll!" Eric looked ahead and saw that the marker was in a hole leading to the next level. He did what he was told. He dipped his head forward and rolled into the hole. He tumbled down a slimy path, reoriented himself and stood with his guns at the ready. The path was clear. "Two hundred meters, mark!" Eric sprinted forward as Flood forms lined the path ahead. The marker on his HUD was directly ahead. "Blow through! Go, go, go!" Eric scooped up a plasma grenade and tossed it ahead. Mixed flesh splattered all around and during the confusion he sprinted right through the middle of a pack of combat forms. Eric watched as the path ahead closed once the Flood realized what was happening, and he jumped over two of them. He landed, then side stepped toward the wall. He jumped up to another ledge, griped it and swung clear to the other side of the flood horde.

"Nice!" Kim shouted.

Eric wasn't done. He kicked out at an ODST combat form, and it dropped a M90. He's was empty. Eric kicked the weapon and it floated up, he grabbed it with his palm and instantly his HUD showed the ammo count. Six rounds were in the weapon, and he quickly discharged six shoots to clear his path forward.

"Thirty meters! Andâ€¦|" Kim began but she stopped as High Charity began to rumble. "Damn it!"

"What's happening?" Eric questioned as he continued to run and hold his balance.

"High Charity is caught in Earth's magnetic field. We're running out of time!"

On the far side of High Charity, Simyaldee, Yalsmadee, Mathew and the Mirratord Grunts relentlessly defended the Landing Zone in the hopes that Eric would find a way out. The Flood were coming from all sides and that was making defense seemingly impossible.

Yalsmadee clutched his energy sword as if it were the only thing that mattered. He swung furiously fast at the slightest twitch that moved toward him. Simyaldee stood at his side, his twin Mirratord blades glowed with a fresh charge as he cut down the combat forms that staggered into range.

Palab and his grunts sat atop plasma turrets near the Pelican's and Phantoms, behind Simyaldee, Mathew and Yalsmadee's line. The grunts main concern was killing the larger and faster Flood Pure forms before they came too close. Palab killed two in succession but as he peered into the distance something caught his eyes. A tower of flames flew into the air behind the Flood's advance, just over a ridge in the floor. Palab couldn't see who was causing the Fire but he quickly alerted Simyaldee.

"Human flame weapon!" Palab pointed as he yelled into his COM.

Simyaldee looked up for a split moment but quickly returned to killing the Flood. "Is it the Honorable one? Has he arrived?"

Mathew began to reload his M90 and quickly looked at his FoF tag. "No, it's 17!" Mathew opened his channel. "17 get over here!"

"I can'tâ€¦" Kate huffed over the line. She was exhausted and cut off from the group. "Daveâ€¦ Dave is down! He can't walk! I'm not leaving him here!"

"Kateâ€¦" Dave moaned on the line. "I'm done forâ€¦ leave me here."

Kate yelled. "I'll carry you!"

"Watch your back!" Dave discharged a weapon as a Flood roared in the COM. "Youâ€¦ you can't carry me and fight."

Mathew gazed through the flood and found the weakest path. "You are sixty meters away on the far side of the ridge. I'm coming! Hold fast!" Mathew dashed forward, knowing that him leaving would weaken the LZ defenses but he couldn't let them die. He fired at the weaker combat forms in front of him and climbed the slippery mound. At the top he could see that Dave's legs had been completely ripped off, most likely the effect of a Pure Form getting too close. Kate stood near him, swinging her flame thrower in all directions and doing a moderate job of keeping the Flood back. Dave was holding an sub machine gun and firing at the smaller infections forms that were crawling toward him.

Mathew jumped into action, firing his shotgun at anything that wasn't burning from Kate's flame. He then shouldered Dave and yelled, "Make a path, 17! Simyaldee we are on headed your way!"

"Understood. Hurry!" Simyaldee roared over the line.

Kate swapped her last fuel cell into the flame thrower and shouted, "Last one!"

Dave held on as tight as he could to Mathew, as Kate fired her Defoliant Projector into the thick of Flood forms. Mathew walked backwards and put pounds of lead and his boot into anything that crawled close. They made their way through the thicket and Mathew cautiously placed Mathew under the phantom's gravity lift.

Kate fired the last of her flame thrower and cursed. "I'm out!" She dropped the defoliant projector and leveled her duel sub machineguns.

Once Dave had rising to the top of the gravity lift Mathew turned back to the line and continued to fire. But High Charity shifted under his feet. Everything that was walking quickly lost its balance and stumbled to the ground. Simyaldee stood to his knees and radioed the Pelican pilot.

"Report!"

"We have entered the human world's gravity well. Three minutes until High Charity enters the wormhole!"

Mathew cursed under his breath. "19, where are you?"

Mathew's COM burst with a static chirp. "Too far away! EVAC!"

Simyaldee added. "We shall not leave you, honorable one. We will finish this fight on the other side of the Wormhole." Yalsmadee looked to his father with a curious gaze. Dozens of humans had died in the past hour, why was this human any better?

"Negative!" Eric shot back. "We don't know what's over there, and the situation could be worse than we think. I'm close to the insertion pod room. I'll make my exit there! Get out of here now! I'll see you on the ground."

"19, you better not be lying to me!" Mathew shouted as he fired while retreating to the phantom. Kate, Yalsmadee and Simyladee did the same. The flood attacked in massive droves, as if signaled by their retreat. Mathew, Kate and the grunts were the first to jump into the gravity lift. They fired as they climbed.

Yalsmadee kicked out at a flood form that had jumped toward him. His hoof and power caused the flood form's rotten flesh to fall apart with the impact. He then turned and watched as Simyaldee masterfully cut down anything that came around him, retreating slowly but retreating none the less.

"Lieutenant Simyal, we should go!"

"I am behind you, Commander." Simyaldee stated as he spun and ran toward the lift. They both jumped into the purple light together and dropped plasma grenades as the lift closed behind them. "Go!" Yalsmadee yelled to the pilot.

The pilot swung the phantom and streaked over the city streets of High Charity. Thousands of infection forms and combat forms massed around the streets, but there was no time to admire the scenery. They pushed on toward the exit at full speed.

Mathew looked out the video portal at the sight below them. "Earth would have been extinct if this ship lands." He leaned back and began to help Dave cope with his injuries. Dave sat with his head in Kate's lap while she held his hand for support.

Kate stated through her private COM. "He hasn't said much sense I came up."

Mathew quickly linked to Dave's bio-stat monitor. "How's his

grip?"

"No." Dave." Kate whispered as she tried to see how tight Dave was holding her hand. Mathew didn't need Kate to answer, the bio-stat was saying it all; flat line across the board.

"Too much blood loss." Mathew huffed. "The containment on his suit was lost, so it couldn't seal the wounds on his legs." Mathew sat back against the bulkhead as he watched Kate hold Dave's hand. Mathew couldn't see Kate's face behind her golden face mask, but judging by her body posture he could only imagine that she was crying. Kate slowly lowered Dave's hand across his chest but she continued to hold him as the Phantom bobbed from side to side.

The Phantom banked and rolled as the pilot made his way through the hole made by the longswords when they first infiltrated High Charity. Beyond was the dark sunrise of a new day over Africa. The phantom rumbled as its engines hummed in the atmosphere of Earth. The pilot turned and began to fly parallel to High Charity's course as Simyaldee and Mathew glared into the forward monitor.

"That's the wormhole?" Mathew scuffed as he glared ahead.

"Yes." Simyaldee stated.

Ahead of them, floating nearly a hundred feet from the Ark's extended Pylons, was a blue ball with more than a five mile radius. As Mathew looked closer he could see that the blue edge vanished as he gazed inward toward the heart of the portal. It became a deep black as light vanished at the center. Its mass was immense. High Charity could easily fit through it with much caution.

Simyaldee added, "I could see the portal once I was in the air above Eden."

Mathew shook his head in shock, but his stunned gaze quickly faded. "19, report! El Tee, do you copy?" Only static followed. "Get us back in there!"

"No." Yalsmadee stated. "You were given orders. And I also noticed that the external COM channels were being jammed as we exited the ship."

Simyaldee turned to Yalsmadee and glared at him sternly. "Why did you not report this?"

"Then we would all have been stuck on that ship." Yalsmadee stated. "Your Honored human knew the risk and gave you the charge of protecting his team. If he dies you would ruin his memory by jeopardizing his own kin."

Mathew huffed before Simyaldee could respond. "He's right."

"I know." Simyaldee stated as he turned back to the view screen. "But it does not make it just."

"How long before High Charity enters the portal?" Yalsmadee questioned.

The pilot looked over his instruments, estimated his speed to be

equal to High Charity's, and then guessed the distance to the wormhole's threshold. "Less than twenty seconds."

At the edge of High Charity's former space dock, Eric raced ahead. He still had time, time to get out of High Charity. Siren cut into his thoughts. "I just monitored the team's EVAC course. They just exited High Charity."

"How much time do we have?" Eric shot back.

"Not muchâ€| less than a minute, I think." Siren stated.

There was a small blip on Eric's COM, though it was full of static.

Eric tried to respond. "Say again!"

"No use." Siren stated. "Gravemind is blocking all COM channels."

Eric hustled forward cutting past Flood forms before they could react. High Charity's vibrations were intensifying as he ran and he struggled to maintain his balance.

Siren shouted. "Ahead! The insertion pods are just ahead!" Eric sprinted as hard as he could. Time was critical, but as he entered the room, Siren's tone seemed to sink. "The podsâ€|noâ€| no! The pods areâ€|"

"Empty." Eric huffed as he examined numerous chambers. "Is there another room?"

"Yes, but it's too far away! We won't make it! This was the closest Pod room in the ship. There are other insertion pod chambers, but this was the closest. The othersâ€|" Siren was lost in her own thoughts.

Eric didn't have the time to calm her down. "Prep the launch!"

"What?"

"We're jumping."

"_I have been waiting."_ Gravemind's voice sounded in the room. Eric turned as Gravemind rose behind him. Numerous tentacles swung around in a desperate attempt to grab Eric. _"You came to free one from my grave, but now you flee without your prize. Why do you flee the Path? If it is safe, then you should go. Yet to stay here would be your death."_

Siren blurted. "Pod two is ready for launch!" Eric watched as the green light blinked over the pod and dived inside. A tentacle darted after Eric but it missed as he slid down the shoot.

"_I journey to your weapon's control. To the heart of your Empire to destroy the means of my death. There I shall wait and see and listen. For now, I will spare this place of your inheritance, but know that I will return."_

Eric slid down the tube as light opened before him. Wind whipped over his body as he fell. Below was the Ark portal generator, and his descent would make him miss the Wormhole itself by a few hundred feet. Eric and Siren had avoided going through the portal, but now they had to contend with a freefall of nearly three miles.

Siren stated, "Simyaldee's phantom is close!" Eric's COM opened as Siren yelled, "This is Siren and Black Ops 19, requesting immediate pickup! Lock in on our COM."

The phantom pilot scanned the area. "I have them!" They were far away and it would be a tricky catch. The pilot tilted the ship and accelerated. At their side, High Charity quickly began to merge into the wormhole, vanishing piece by piece as the massive ship crossed space time. But they didn't care to watch it leave, their goal was to try and catch their friend before he made a hard imprint on the ground below. "Five hundred meters!" The pilot yelled as he sped ahead. Soon Eric was in view."

"There he is!" Mathew yelled. "Open the side hatch." Mathew raced back to the main troop bay as the side wall began to lower. Air filled the bay and everyone inside held on.

Pallab stood and waddled to Mathew's side. "Look there! Honored human falling!" He shouted as he pointed at Eric's all black form.

Mathew cursed under his breath. "I need a rope or anything long enough!"

Palab gave Mathew a gangplank tether from the storage unit and he tied it to the ship. Mathew quickly wrapped the tether around his waist and calculated his jump.

"Closer!" Mathew shouted to the pilot. "Closer!" He added once more. "We only get one shot!"

The ground was coming up fast as the two object streaked downward. Eric extended his arms and legs to create as much air drag as possible, but his SPI armor wasn't as light as the modified ODST armor he was accustomed to wearing in the past. There was very little air resistance he could make in a half ton of armor.

Kate glared out the hatch as Mathew and Palab prepared the mid air retrieval, Yalsmadee stood at her side. Simyaldee stood at the cockpit hatch with the pilot, but still watched feverishly as Eric fell.

Mathew dived out of the ship with a mighty leap; his arms outstretched and speeding toward Eric. Eric adjusted in midair, pivoting his hips to turn toward Mathew. Mathew sped toward him as the ground came at them at a furious rate. Time seemed to stop as Eric reached to grab Mathew's quickly approaching hand.

The gangplank cable snapped taught and whipped Mathew back, leaving Eric and his AI Siren to freefall toward the Metal surface of the Ark wormhole generator.

"Eric!" Mathew shouted as he was snapped back toward the ship.

Eric powered on his COM. "Pilot, level off. Simyaldee, get my

Spartans home."

"Honored oneâ€¦ I shall." Simyaldee replied with a heartfelt sigh. Kate, from her sitting position with Dave upon her lap, turned her head away from Eric's descent. She couldn't watch. Palab pulled feverishly on Mathew's cable until Mathew was safely inside the hull. But Mathew fought to try again. It took Palab, Migpap and Yalsmadee to keep Mathew at bay. There wasn't enough time to make another leap.

Eric commented. "Phantom isn't a Pelican, Matt. A pelican can skip and tumble along the ground if you angle it right, but a phantom will explode on impact."

"Not like this!" Mathew commented over the line. "We made it to the end! You can't go out like this!"

Eric turned off the COM.

Eric looked forward as the metal pylons generating the Ark wormhole came closer. Siren softly whispered, "Swelling Gel Layer to max pressure. I'll inject enough agents in your system to numb your body enough so that you don't feel the impactâ€¦"

"Thanks." Eric stated.

"I couldn't get you back to her." Siren softly whispered. "Get you back to Rose."

"Don't talk like I'm already dead."

"Butâ€¦"

"We'll make it."

"I know, I meanâ€¦ I hope."

"My luck hasn't run out yet." The ground grew larger as Eric streaked toward the enormous spike like pylons that extended outward from the Ark. Energy flowed up the tower sized pylons as they stabilized the wormhole overhead.

Siren's voice changed into Kim's voice and she sniffled in his ears. "Eric, I don't want to say goodbye to you again. Not like this."

"We'll be fine."

"Ericâ€¦ Iâ€¦" Siren's words were lost in the sound of metal hitting metal.

Sparks popped all around as Eric gripped the side of the sloped pylon extending out of the top level of the Ark. With his armored glove he dug into the metal surface, but the super thick alloy used by the Forerunners would not give. Eric clawed at the smooth surface, attempting to slow his descent. His armor's gel layer swelled and excess gel was vented through the release valves as the constant impacts on the metal surface overloaded the motors. Eric's face mask cracked as his head hit a metal edge, but that same edge also provided a hand grip. Eric grabbed it, and a half ton of armor

suddenly came to an abrupt stop. Eric could hear, but not feel, the ligaments in his arms tear from the strain, and finally his arm could not hold the momentum shift. His grip released and he went into a free fall off the side of the Pylon.

He landed on the Ark after a near fifty foot fall, and the metal thud echoed for miles around the cavernous valley where the Ark Wormhole Generator lay. Eric laid on his back gazing into the blue and black void of the wormhole above. He couldn't feel anything, but he also couldn't move. Through his cracked mask he could see the phantom descending toward him. His mind could not feel the damage that had been done, but his body was could still respond to the damage. His fingers were twitching, his left leg was lying in an awkward angle, and Eric was finding it hard to keep his eyes open. His vision was becoming blurry and he could see that blood was swelling in his eyes.

He wanted to sleep.

Siren's voice crackled in a broken speech, "â€|. EEEEEEricâ€| youuuuuuâ€| rememberâ€| rainâ€| looooveâ€| againâ€| youuuuuuuâ€|" and then silence. The soft hum that vibrated from his armor faded and his SPI Armor powered off. Eric watched as a blurry figure dropped from the phantom. But at that moment the drugs in his system began to wear off. Pain began to course all over him and instantly Eric's mind shut down as the sensation of so much pain overwhelmed him. Even in the darkness of his unconscious state Eric could still feel the pain. The only difference now was that he didn't care. And after a few moments there was no pain. No dreams. No thoughts or voices; just darkness.

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Newport News, Virginia

> UNSC Special Weapons Dept. / ONI Research and Development Center

> March 5, 2553<p>

The memorial two days ago still sat in Rose's mind, but she had other pressing matters to attend to. Rose sat at her desk as she examined the files she had been given permission to access. It was a Spartan database for every listed Spartan that had served under the UNSC. Hundreds of Spartan I, the preliminary soldiers used to test combat induced drugs, hypnosis, and muscular enhancements. They were soldiers that were told that they could live normal lives, but would be stronger and faster then any other soldier in combat. The poor men and women during this phase lived with chronic headaches, sleepless nights and numerous wartime delusions or hysteria. Eight out of ten were considered incapable of leading normal lifestyles, while the remaining few were constantly supervised and usually died in combat.

The List of Spartan II was even more watered down. Hundreds of children were kidnapped and replaced with flash clones so that their parents would not panic and look for them. All of the flash clones eventually died, as flash clones could only live for a few days or weeks at most. Rose thought about the parents of those children and how they truly believed their children were dead. She rubbed her own belly in prayers that ONI would never try to repeat their prior deeds on her child.

Rose smiled. "No. They would never come near me." She thought to herself. Rose continued to examine the file and saw that every Spartan II had an MIA stamp beside their names, including 117; the Master Chief. Kelly 087's file had been deleted. Rose was curious as to why. She pulled Spartan 087's file and placed it to the side. Then she examined the list of hundreds of Spartan III. All of them were listed as MIA with the exception of Kate G017.

MIA was used because ONI didn't want any of their Spartans to be labeled as DEAD. Such a thing was demoralizing during a war as they wanted the Spartan's to seem invincible. The concept made sense, but the war was over. There was no longer a need for the files to be listed as MIA. But what Hood told her was correct. It would be years before the true light of the Spartan program came to the surface. But in the mean time Rose was going to devote her life to uplifting the more secretly guarded Black Ops Spartans.

A middle aged white man walked toward Rose's desk and dropped another data pad in front of her. "You aren't going to like it."

"You found the Black Ops file?" Rose questioned.

"We could be hung for searching for his material." He sighed as he sat near Rose. "ONI doesn't like people poking around their servers. And seeing that you work for ONI only makes making you disappear that much easier."

Rose examined the data. "Black Operations program under the guidance of Doctor Carolyn Smith." Her eyes widened as she continued to read. "What? This isn't right!"

"I told you wouldn't like it." The man said.

Rose read it aloud. "The Black Operations program was a series of Covenant intelligence gathering techniques whereby a Covenant soldier, preferably an Elite (Sangheili) was captured and interrogatedâ€¦. What a load of shit!" She scanned the file further and it was all the same. "Another cover up!"

"Yeah." The man added. "What did you think they would do? Rose, your Black Ops Spartan's never officially existed. Any search or query on the Black Ops turned up only a listing of how to successfully interrogate an enemy. ONI covered their own asses with a big fat lie."

Rose turned off the datapad and lowered her head to the desk. "Thanks, Phil. You can go home."

"Sorry, Rose. I tried to help." Phil said as he stood from the desk. "I mean, I'm the best programmer in the R&D, so if I can't find it then it is probably gone." The man turned and started to walk away. "I'll see you Monday. Stop stressing over this, it can't be good for the baby."

Rose sighed heavily as Phil walked out the door. Phil turned a corner and placed his chatter to his ear. "She bought it. At least for now, but I'll keep my eye on her just in case."

"_Good, the Admiral will be glad to know that._" The voice on the

other end stated. _"We'd hate to harm Miss Santos while she is carrying a child."_

"It would stain our creditability." Phil added.

"_That aside, we are sending a team to handle the situation more thoroughly. They will convince her to stop sticking her nose in our affairs."_

"How?"

"_It's beyond your pay grade. Your duty is to watch Miss Santos. It is my belief that after today she will end her constant enquires."_ The line died and Phil pocketed his chatter. He walked out the front door as the salty air of the James River blew across his brow. He lit a cigarette in thought and then walked to his car.

Inside, Rose was thumbing through her datapad for lists of contacts in Australia. "If I can get someone closer to High Command, maybe I can get deeper."

Anne walked up to the desk and reported. "Hey, I got through to my friend. She's been keeping tabs on the Elites Communications with Lord Hood."

"Well?"

Anne sat back in her chair. "This is what was sent to the UEG from the Royal House of Sanghelios:

"_To whom it may concernâ€|_

"_Leaders of the Human world, we thank you for the support you have offered us during the last [months of our efforts to rebuild. Our offer to you also still stands, if ever you need it. We have found a distant colony within our territory and claimed it once again as our own. This world's former name has no meaning to our rebirth, and thus with pride our Queen renamed it Sanghelios. We now stand with pride to return to our former glory and might, but without the lingering darkness that the Prophets have cast over our heads. Even now we hunt them, and any other Covenant shadows, across the stars._

"_With a humble decree we accept your alliance negotiations and several of our High Elders will meet with you on the barren world of Reach. This former stronghold of your great might shall always be remembered as the world where the Sangheili and the Humans joined and became brothers. Together we will sit, talk and rebuild this world. Though it will be your world, we wish to assist you to help soften the sentiment against us. Though you can not forget our past, we hope that we can move forward together._

"_With the Covenant no more, and the Prophets on the run, the Unggoy have extended a wish to join our alliance. Palab the Great, the Unggoy King, has extended limitless resources to our aid. His world, Balaho, is rich with Methane and numerous minerals used in the construction of the hardest steels found in the galaxy. This is a resource we can not pass up. But unlike our past use of the Unggoy, we will work together with them. Palab the Great will send his first disciple, Migpap, as an emissary to Reach during our Alliance negotiations. The future of our union will be grand._

"_Again, with great respect, we thank you for agreeing to meet. As stated in our first memo, the Arbiter and the leader of the High Council will be in attendance as well as numerous officials, the Unggoy Emissary and his team. There was once a day that we feared the voice of the Unggoy. Now it brings us much pride to hear their voice upon any discussions concerning their future. Things have truly changed, for us all. Our Queen and her First send their love and best wishes to the entire Human world. _

_High Elder Bal'mae

> Head of the Sangheili High Council
 Selected Speaker for the House of Vas

> Speaker for the House of Mae
 --First Age of Rebirth--_

Anne closed the datapad with a smile. "It seems peace with them will happen in my lifetime. Not sure how I feel about it, but what can I say. We can't ignore them."

Rose smiled. "At least Palab was able to take his grunts home. I still wonder about Gridolee and the Mirratord though."

"Yeah, but I'm sure they're fine. After all, isn't Simyaldee now the Queen's First, or whatever?"

"Yeah. He's head of her house, I think. Since the Council was reformed I'm sure the Queen doesn't have as much power as she did during that battle, but she is their ruler.

Anne smiled. "You really _did_ bond with them while you were out there?"

"They aren't just animals or monsters to me." Rose added. "I worked with them, fought with them and watched them die. I know what they did to us, but I also know that they were tricked."

"Well to each their own." Anne stated. She gave Rose the datapad and looked at her watch. "It's late and we're all alone here. Want to get out of here and grab some dinner? My treat!"

"Thanks, but I'm trying to reach my contacts at HighCOM. They should be getting ready for work over there soon. I hope to catch them as soon as they get into the office."

Anne leaned over the table and plucked Rose's forehead. "Think about the baby. Don't stay up all night." Anne then smiled and walked toward the door. With a click the door closed and Rose was alone. She rubbed the point on her forehead that Anne had flicked, and chuckled to herself. Anne was so young and playful that it was an almost complete contrast to the girl she met in the Gatekeeper facility. Anne was a shattered woman, torn and lost. She had been cast aside, nearly killed herself, and fearful that she was going to become a flood.

"Time really does heal." Rose said with a sigh.

She dialed her chatter and called a few people, but no one picked up. "I guess it's still too early in Australia." She closed her chatter and rubbed her belly. "I should have taken Anne up on her offer." She stood from her desk and packed the datapads into a shoulder bag. It

had been a long week and she was looking forward to staying in over the weekend.

The walk to her car was quick and the drive to her nearby apartment over looking the river was even quicker. As she neared her apartment door she waved her ID card and the door slid open with a soft hum. Inside the lights were already on and she froze as she noticed someone was standing inside the door frame of the kitchen. Her heart raced as she stepped away from the thin white man. The door closed behind her and locked.

"Miss Santos." He said in a calming manor. "Please, do not be alarmed. Our being here is for your own protection." The man was short, thin, and Rose assumed that if she needed to fight him she could, even with her child. He was wearing regular street clothes and looked as though he could blend in a crowd easily. Rose instantly had memories of how Wesley dressed when he was shadowing her every movement during the MJOLNIR Mark VI program; they were nearly identical.

"Who are you and why are you in my apartment?" She yelled.

"As I said, we are here for your protection." The man pointed to Rose's couch and two other men stood. "If you will come with us to the roof, everything will be explained."

"I'm not going anywhere with you." Rose stated as she began to back away.

The thin man near the door sighed, "Ma'am, we are not here to harm you. If that were the case we would have done it without you knowing." The man held up his identification. "We are with Section III. You've made some enemy's in high places and they want to calm your fury. A peace offering, if you will."

"A peace offering?" Rose repeated. "So ONI isn't going to simply erase me like they do everyone else? What's on the roof?" Rose questioned.

"Our transport." The man answered. "I promise we do not plan to kidnap you or do anything harmful. We simply want to calm your fury." Rose nodded and they four of them made their way to the roof.

The door to the roof parted and the salty river air whipped through Rose's jet black hair. She pulled it back to keep it out of her eyes; in case she needed to run. On the roof was a Pelican. The thin small man and his two assistants stood at the roof door and motioned for Rose to walk toward the Pelican. The rear bay of the bird opened. Rose looked into the dark hull of the bird but couldn't see anything. Instead she heard a voice and the sound of metal walking on metal.

"Oh look, she's glowing." A familiar female voice stated. "I estimate she's four months pregnant." Rose placed her hands to her hips as three armor clad Spartans walked into view; their SPI armor was black with a silver face mask that stretched from their chins to the top of their heads. The voice was unmistakably Siren's. "Rose, can I be the Godmother?" Ignoring Siren's statement, the lead Spartan walked forward, leaving the other two at the pelican's ramp. His silver face mask reflected Rose's frozen glare of anger. Siren laughed. "She

doesn't look too happy to see you." The Spartan stopped in front of Rose with only a few inches between them. He unlocked the seal to his helmet to reveal his clean shaven face.

"You're late, Eric," she fumed, but a tear rolled from her eye as she glared up at Eric's six foot three frame. She sniffled.

"Sorry," Eric said with a soft smile, "I overslept."

"I was worried." Rose smiled as Eric dried her eyes with his gloved hand. "I thought that you â€¦ I hoped, but didn't expectâ€¦"

"I know." Eric smiled.

"Why didn't you call me?"

The thin man behind Rose spoke up, "That would be my fault, ma'am. ONI wanted to keep the Spartans on a low profile until they were completely rested from their surgeries. The armor upgrades you gave them pushed the threshold of their limits and they need a great deal of recovery time. Also, 19 was unconscious for seven days while they fixed him up."

"What happened?" Rose asked as she stepped even closer to Eric; she pressed herself against him and engulfed herself in his presence.

Siren answered, "We decided to go sky diving over the Ark wormhole generator."

Mathew added from the pelican ramp. "Yeah, but watching you slide down that Pylon was some kind of legendary feat."

"How long can you stay?" Rose questioned.

Eric said, "Ten days. But then we are off to Reach until the negotiations are complete."

"Why do you have to go?" Rose softly frowned, showing a soft womanliness that she rarely displayed.

"We aren't going alone. You're coming too."

"Really?"

The thin man coughed as he spoke, "Yes, apparently word got out that the _Honorable Human's_ mate was caring his child. The elites want to have a celebration in your honor, Miss Santos. Apparently the first male child of a family is a reason for celebration amongst the Elites. Lord Hood agreed and ONI is fronting the bill; so long as you discontinue your constant enquiries into the Black Ops Program."

Rose grinned and walked to the edge of the building, where a row of metal benches overlooked the James River and the setting spring sun. Rose sat down and Eric sat beside her, placing his helmet on the bench at his side and his arm around her. Tears rolled down her face as she happily smiled. Kate and Mathew stood behind them and watched as the sun sat over the river's edge. It was a beautiful evening as they all took a moment to finally embrace what they had worked so

hard to save. So many of the Black Ops had fallen in the past fifteen years of the war, and only two original members remained. Kate, the Spartan III, was a happy addition to the family. She wore Melanie's SPI armor with pride and honor.

Eric pulled a silver flask from his belt clip and held it high. Engraved upon the flask were the words 'Do or Die'. Eric took a quick drink and then passed it to Mathew and he also held it high and took a drink.

Mathew looked at Kate as the young girl glared into the distant sky. "This belonged to our sister—our best friend." Kate turned and looked at the flask and then she looked at Mathew. Her short blonde hair bobbed from the gentle breeze. "Hold it high, and remember all those who fought and died by your side." Kate took the flask, held it up to the sun and took a sip of the drink. She closed it and gave it back to Eric.

Siren's voice softly echoed from Eric's helmet. "We won't forget them. Any of them."

The End.

* * *

>Thank you. To all those who have followed this trilogy, showed your support, and kept me encouraged to finish. A story for fans written by a fan of the Halo Universe. This would not be possible if it were not for you readers, and the Bungie creative team. As always, Comments and criticisms are welcome. <p>Special thanks to ...<p>

-Mom

> -Dad
 -Lil Bro

> -Xx Lai Tasha xX (run, run, run, rest, repeat)
 -Scorptank (get back to writing, kid!)

> -Haloxenon (where far out thou?)
 -Highland Brute (cut throat and to the point)

> -HLC 3 (happy b-day)
 -MrClark (lurking in the shadows)

> -Dl Daddy (keeping it real)
 -Last Standing (keeping the pressure up)

> -Limited Edition (one of the first)
 -Aardvark (cheering from the corner, while leading the race)

> -RAG3 ON3 (A fan group? w00t:D)
 -Warbirds (death from above)

> -Aozora (Machinima for the masses)
 -The Lone Heretic (keeper of the sacred Mirrator'd Halls)

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 -Everyone that has knowingly used the "Mirrator'd" in their stories, and helped lift it to epic proportions

> -The Bungie team (1200 pages of Halo FanFiction and you can't tell me 'hi'? lol)
 -God (gave me a little talent, so that I can rule the world XD)

> And to everyone else that I know I missed. Thank you!<p>

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 All names created from the Halo games and novels ® Bungie Studios®,

> All names created with the Halo Side Trilogy ®Bungie Studios®,

and SoulGuard
 This is a work of fantasy and fiction based on the Halo Franchise. Any likeness to real people, places or events are coincidental. Halo is rate M for mature gamers over the age 17._

End
file.